



Greetings from Ma'an lil-Hayat/L'Arche Bethlehem

February 2019



Dear Friends,

Relationships of mutuality between people with and without developmental disabilities are at the center of the identity and mission of L'Arche communities around the world, and the community of Ma'an lil-Hayat (Together for Life) in Bethlehem is no different. Life-giving friendships are the foundation of our community and enable us to grow and share the fruit of these relationships beyond the borders of our physical buildings in Bethlehem and Dar Salah.

Our life together calls us to welcome both the challenges and the joys of day-to-day life within a political context that can often be stressful and unpredictable. Together – assistants and core members (those with intellectual disabilities) – we choose to build a community where each person experiences a sense of belonging, where each person's voice is heard, where each person's gifts are recognized, developed, and shared. We take time to reflect on our experience in order to make the decisions that will lead to more creative ways of living and announcing our mission.

As time goes by (we will celebrate our 10th anniversary this year!), our blessings seem to multiply exponentially. We have grown in size and space and number, and our roots are extending deeper and deeper into our rich Palestinian soil. More and more people are finding a source of hope and joy through Ma'an lil-Hayat as they engage with us as core members, assistants, board members, volunteers, visitors, and partners.

Your continued support in so many varied ways allows us to share more generously the treasures of community life that our world is longing for.

Thank you!

Mahera Nassar Ghareeb
Community Leader/Executive Director

◆◆ Noteworthy ◆◆

- ❖ In January 2019, we celebrated our new community mandate and confirmed Mahera as community leader for another four years. A gift for all of us!
- ❖ At our most recent annual General Assembly meeting, seven people were elected to our board of directors, among them Flavia Andon, the board president. Congratulations!
- ❖ At the L'Arche Federation Assembly in Belfast in June 2017, Ma'an lil-Hayat was welcomed as a **probationary community!** Yet another step in the process toward permanent membership in the Federation. A three-person delegation from Palestine participated in the Assembly (see page two).
- ❖ Ma'an lil-Hayat's **second day program** in the nearby village of Dar Salah was inaugurated in April 2017 and now welcomes ten core members, with a team of three assistants and numerous volunteers.



New outdoor gathering space!



Flavia Andon (l), board president, and Mahera

L'Arche Federation Assembly in Belfast



Ma'an lil-Hayat is welcomed as a probationary community of L'Arche

The delegation from Ma'an lil-Hayat to the L'Arche Federation Assembly in Belfast (June 2017) consisted of Ayat Sanad, Mahera Nassar Ghareeb, and Flavia Andon. Below is a brief reflection by Flavia.

Is it worth passing through the countless dehumanizing checkpoints?! I always ask myself this question every time I receive an invitation that requires travelling abroad...

As I looked at the letter that showed our schedule for the week in Belfast for the L'Arche Federation Assembly, I knew that the actual experience would probably be quite different. The fact that I would be with Mahera was encouraging for me, but knowing that there would be more than 500 persons from 37 different countries, in addition to lovely Ayat, one of the core members of our community, made me wonder about how interesting and challenging it would be.

Today, as I reflect on having lived this experience, I realize how much I cherish it. The L'Arche Federation Assembly was a living example of a unique human experience where we learn to lower our defenses and be open to living and celebrating diversity and unity in the presence of love, care, and simplicity at a time when the world around us is living in conflict and war.

In the end, what remains is not the checkpoints but rather a hope that has wings, and all we need to do is spread these wings to bring hope beyond all borders...

Interview with Ayat and Mahera, delegates to the L'Arche Federation Assembly

How did you feel when you found out you would be representing Ma'an lil-Hayat at the Federation Assembly?

We were really excited to be invited to participate, especially since this would be the first time that an exclusively Palestinian delegation – including a core member – would be sent to represent Ma'an at an international gathering of L'Arche. *What was the highlight of the trip?*

The entire trip was a wonderful experience. But we have to admit that being together for 10 days abroad has its challenges! It was a very special time since we knew that L'Arche Bethlehem would be welcomed officially as a probationary community and would no longer be simply a "project." We had been looking forward to this for years.

What did you find challenging?

It was very challenging to be part of the Drama Team. Both of us have some experience on stage, but we learned a lot more from working with the Drama Team. We loved being on stage and leading the gatherings, but it was not easy to have the time and energy needed to practice every day.

What would you like to share with our friends about your experience?

It was an amazing experience to meet old and new friends from L'Arche communities all over the world, and to experience the gift of living together as part of the big L'Arche family. As much as we hope to live this experience again, we would also love it if all the members of Ma'an lil-Hayat could have a chance to experience this in the future.



•••Noteworthy•••

- Ma'an lil-Hayat brings together approximately 50 people (Bethlehem and Dar Salah locations), 36 of whom are persons with intellectual disabilities.
- Our last annual holiday trip to Tabgha on the Sea of Galilee took place in August 2018. A number of volunteers from Palestine, Germany, France, Canada, and Italy joined us for fun days of swimming, relaxing, dancing, laughing, and exploring. Fortunately, this year the Israeli military granted permission for all of us to leave Bethlehem to go to Galilee. The year before, ten of our core members were refused permission, so we had to set up a "parallel holiday program" in Bethlehem for those who were unable to go to Tabgha.



Annual trip to Tabgha on the Sea of Galilee



Formation session in Egypt for assistants from the Middle East

- In February 2018, ten people from Ma'an participated in a L'Arche formation session in Egypt that brought together assistants and board members from the communities/projects in Damascus (Syria), Minya, Alexandria, and Cairo (Egypt), and Palestine. More than 30 people gathered to work hard, relax together, and grow in a sense of belonging to one another and to the larger federation of L'Arche.



Inclusive theater tour in Germany with Inad Theater

- The various daily activities at Ma'an lil-Hayat – artistic, recreational, social, and therapeutic – contribute to community-building, confidence-building, competence-building, and gratitude-building among all members.
- Generous friends and organizations often invite us to share special moments of fun and relaxation. Picnics, water parks, and horseback riding in such places as Jericho, Artas (Bethlehem), and Wadi Bathan (Nablus) give us the opportunity to enjoy the scenic areas of Palestine and renew our energy.
- Celebrating International Women's Day is always a treat, and in 2017, three female core members from Ma'an were honored by Taqdeer organization in an elegant ceremony in Bethlehem.
- Our felt-making efforts continue to bring joy not only to those of us at Ma'an who create beautiful works of art but also to the many people and shops that buy these unique items. During 2018, we sold more than 15,000 sheep, close to 3,500 nativity scenes, and more than 2,000 dove ornaments, not to mention hundreds of other products such as wall hangings, purses, pillow covers, and Christmas ornaments.

- Ma'an lil-Hayat partnered with Inad Theater in Beit Jala to offer performances and workshops in Germany on inclusive theater. An extraordinary experience for everyone! We look forward to future collaborative projects.



...Encounters...

•One of the highlights of our community life is spending time with our friends at the Four Homes of Mercy in Bethany. Our regular visits throughout the year help to nurture and nourish the significant links between L'Arche and our friends in Bethany that predate the founding of Ma'an lil-Hayat. And our friends have started to come visit us in Bethlehem as well.

•Each month, Ma'an welcomes numerous visitors – groups and individuals, local and international – for an average monthly total of more than 100 people! (Ironically, in some circles, they call us an “isolated” community!) Some of our local visitors include university students who spend their practicum time at Ma'an; and some of our international visitors include volunteers who stay for various lengths of time. Precious friendships develop and remind us that relationships are what keep us grounded in our mission as L'Arche and connected to the rich diversity of different cultures and contexts.



A Powerful Legacy

Sana Hamdan, one of our long-term core members, died in May 2017 after a year-long courageous struggle with cancer. In our last newsletter we recounted how this touching story began. Sana had undergone chemotherapy treatment as an outpatient at the local government hospital in 2017. As the months went by, she and Amal (the assistant who accompanied Sana to the hospital) got to know the other patients in the unit. In fact, Sana and Amal transformed the atmosphere into a welcoming space where the patients and their companions began to form a little community of friends. So this oftentimes dismal, even frightening place became a safe space where friends could connect, support each other, and – dare we say it? – experience joy. After Sana finished her chemotherapy sessions, she and Amal realized that they missed their friends – the other outpatients – at the hospital. And Sana asked: “But who will make them smile if we aren't there?” Thus began our search for a way to remain faithful to our friends. Remembering that no refreshments or snacks were provided at the hospital for the chemotherapy patients and their companions, we decided to prepare some sandwiches, fruit, and drinks ourselves and go twice a week to visit and offer the snacks we had made. For more than two years now, we have been faithful to this new mission and continue Sana's powerful legacy of friendship and joy.



Join Us!

As a volunteer: Are you creative, responsible, open? We invite you to consider being a volunteer at Ma'an lil-Hayat. More than an ordinary volunteer opportunity, we offer you an experience, an adventure, an apprenticeship that will benefit you for the rest of your life. Discover that every human life, limited though it may be, is worth celebrating. No specialized skills are required. Volunteers are welcome to spend as little as two hours per week and will participate in a variety of interesting and often very creative daily tasks.

As a partner in the mission: Are you interested in supporting the vision and mission of Ma'an lil-Hayat? Would you like to contribute to its sustainability and help to ensure that its ongoing needs are met? We invite you to share some of your resources (professional, financial, etc.) and become part of a new and exciting community-building endeavor. Contact us soon!

Photos: Elodie Perriot and others



Ma'an lil-Hayat/L'Arche Bethlehem
POB 182, Bethlehem, Palestine
Tel./Fax: +970-2-274-3345
arche.bethlehem@gmail.com

