

Reverend Munther Isaac: "We are angry. We are broken. This should have been a time of joy. Instead, we are mourning. We are fearful. More than 20,000 killed. Thousands are still under the rubble. Close to 9,000 children killed in the most brutal ways. Day after day, 1.9 million displaced. Hundreds of thousands of homes destroyed. Gaza as we know it, no longer exists. This is an annihilation. This is a genocide. The world is watching. Churches are watching. The people of Gaza are sending live images of their own execution. Maybe the world cares. But it goes on."

Meghan: That was Reverend Munther Isaac, from a Christmas service in Bethlehem last year called "Christ in the rubble. A liturgy of lament." He lives in Bethlehem, in the West Bank. He is a Lutheran pastor, Palestinian theologian and Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College.

Today on the show, a conversation between Reverend Munther and a former student of his, Anthony Khair. Anthony was part of MCC's IVEP program last year. He worked with MCC's advocacy office in Washington, D.C. Today he is doing his master's in theology, peace, trauma and religious studies at the University of Amsterdam. Reverend Munther is a friend of MCC.

As the war wages on in Palestine and Israel and Christmas is around the corner, we wanted to hear how these two Christian Palestinian men are navigating the grief and loss of the last year. And how they are approaching Christmas.

In this podcast episode, you will hear terms like genocide and apartheid—terms that are also being discussed currently in the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. The ICJ says it's 'plausible' Israel committed genocide in Gaza and has ordered Israel to ensure its military does not take actions that violate the Genocide Convention.

In their own words, our guests today will reflect on the violence in Palestine and Israel over the past year and its impact on them and millions of others. We invite you to listen deeply, with curiosity and compassion, to today's episode.

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I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Anthony and Reverend Munther: (SPEAKING ARABIC—ENGLISH TRANSLATION IN BRACKETS)

Anthony: Sho ya Kassis! (Hey Pastor!)

Reverend Munther: Esh ya Anthony, keefak. (Hey Anthony, how are you)?

Anthony: Wallah tamam enta keefak? (I'm good, how are you doing?)

Munther: Ana ayesh, tamenne alek. (I'm surviving. But tell me about you.)

Anthony: Ana hamdella hayna kolshe tamam. (I am good thank God.)

Munther: Keef eldersa. (How are your studies going?)

Anthony: Hamdella (Thank God, it's going well)

So, Pastor Munther, it's so great to see you. And you've been traveling so much recently that honestly, I can't even keep up. So can you tell us a little bit of what has been the last experiences, where have you been traveling to lately? And how has it been speaking at all these different churches and venues that you have truly excelled at? So, we would love to hear a little bit from you more.

Reverend Munther: Yeah, it's been tough, but we continue to do the work that needs to be done, given that the war has not stopped, and so we have not really stopped talking about Gaza, talking about Palestine and pleading and arguing and advocating for a ceasefire.

I was blessed with the opportunity to speak in several U.S. churches in August.

I think I did more than 21 speaking engagements in 16 days or 17 days. So it was truly a marathon, hopping from one place to the other, from the east to the west. And I'm beginning to see a shift. I'm beginning to see some change. I don't want to say, you know, I don't want to take any, you know, tap on the back, congratulations, given that we still, if we measure it by impact, we still haven't achieved anything, you know. Because the goal is to end the war. The goal is to achieve justice. The goal is for those who committed war crimes to be held accountable.

But I'm definitely seeing progress in terms of people responding to the message. One of the most encouraging and rewarding things in this last speaking tour in August is the amount of Jews and Christians and Muslims coming together to form new interfaith solidarity groups for justice in Palestine and for the ceasefire in Gaza. Everywhere I spoke, there was Jews and Muslims, even though I only spoke, or mainly spoke in churches. And you see that things are changing. You see that the positions of many pastors who were with us are becoming stronger. Clearly, there is a shift in the position of many.

Is it enough? Not yet, obviously.

Anthony: *Thank you so much for that Pastor Munther. Another question that I was going to ask you, since we're approaching Advent, we're approaching Christmas, and we remember back to last Christmas and the beautiful and terrible display that you put up in your church, Christ on the Rubble, Christ Under the Rubble.*

I was witnessing and just thinking, how would it be this year? How is Christmas going to look like this year in Bethlehem? And if you have any plans about your church, or even the sermon that you did the last year, so please, we would love to hear a little bit more about that.

Reverend Munther: *I wish I don't have to do anything. I wish we won't have to do a vigil for Gaza, to plead for a ceasefire. I wish it's only, you know, something about, let's remember those who were killed in the war after it's finished. Let's pray for healing. And the sad thing that, after the end of last Christmas, after the end of the season, we thought, in the church, what do we do with the Christ in the Rubble, the manger, the rubble and Jesus in the middle. And we all said, the church, let's keep it until the war is over.*

Let's keep it as a sign that we continue to pray so that the war is over. And I thought, it will be over by Easter, but it's still there even now as we speak. You know, honestly, part of me wishes we could remove this display and just bring normality back to life. A normal manger with shepherds and magi and the romantic, you know, scene and so on. But the war is not over, and we have to continue speaking. We have to continue sending the message, and we have to continue believing that God is with us in the midst of the rubble. So honestly, we haven't thought about it. I haven't thought about it. I am keeping the slim hope right now that this war would be over before Christmas. Yet all indications show that the ethnic cleansing project of the north of Gaza is still on. They're emptying it one house at a time. They're sending people from the North to preoccupy, and so it doesn't look like Israel's withdrawing, or the bombing will stop, or the killing will stop anytime soon. And as such, I know that I will not stop talking. I know that we will not stop praying and pleading.

And sadly, it feels at this stage that we're calling for the world to humanize the people of Palestine. More than anything, it's not just about a cease fire. It's about humanizing the people of Palestine.

Anthony: *Yes. Thank you so much. And specifically, with the news that we've been posting about Smotrich and Netanyahu speaking about their future plans on the West Bank, literally not even hiding it anymore, which has been tough to even hear. And I would love to hear how you find hope in the midst of all this. Where do you find the courage?*

Reverend Munther: Yeah, so what the Israeli politicians now, the only difference is that they are telling the world what they are about to do. They're no longer pretending or hiding or pretending that they work for a two-state solution. And in fact, what they're telling the world they will do is what they're already doing. The annexation is happening, and it's really scary, because they know they can get away with it. So the question is, where do we find hope? I don't think we should even talk about hope at this time. Right now, it's about survival. How do we survive? How do we survive this assault, this systematic plan to push Palestinians out, to take as much land as they can. And you know, this is Zionism—maximum land, minimum Palestinian demography. And they will try their best to send Palestinians out of Gaza.

So the question is, how do we survive this assault? Honestly, right now, my hope is to survive. And my hope that this war does not extend to the West Bank. And our message right now is entirely focused on sumud. Sumud means resilience, persistence.

How do we endure? How to find courage? How do we have solidarity with one another? How do we empower one another? How do we sustain one another?

And definitely, this is the ministry of the church right now in Palestine, with so many having lost their jobs after Oct. 7. With a culture of despair around us, our ministry has shifted into completely sustaining and encouraging one another. Let's try to survive this era. Hopefully something good will come out of it. Hope seems so something far, far away from now, and resistance seems more, more real. That doesn't mean, as a Christian, I don't have hope. In Palestine we always believe in miracles. But if we are real right now, we're focused on survival.

Anthony: Yeah, thank you. I truly believe that hope has been westernized to the point where we think, people think and people portray, impose this type of idea of hope. Yet, what is the hope that we see? Is it the hope that our houses are going to be demolished next? Is it the hope that, hoping for something better, hoping for a future that we are not seeing anymore. Therefore, really, what I've been seeing with everything that's been happening this year specifically, and what gives me courage to continue is anger. And here's where I continue, so many people over here have been asking me, Anthony, but isn't it in the Bible, doesn't it say to love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you? And I would love to ask you this question.

Reverend Munther: Yeah, there is, there's a prayer actually, that has always encouraged me, to be honest, in which we pray for anger. May God bless us with the, with the gift of anger, you know, because sometimes anger can definitely and truly be a gift to the church. Because if we're not angry when there is a genocide and so much oppression, that means

we have grown numb. The prayer you know, may God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace. And so when we talk about anger, I hope it's anger that is channeled into acting of justice, advocacy, acts of good, in some cases, acts of non-violent resistance, acts of sumud as I talk about them these days. It's good to be angry, but it's not good to remain angry. And you know, anger can be a blessing, as I said, if it's channeled into acts of good. And as hard as it is, we need to allow God to continue to shape and challenge us.

And I find this particularly difficult when I read the, you know, the masterpiece that is the Sermon on the Mountain, the, if you wish, manifesto of Jesus in which he challenges us, it's not about eliminating your enemies, but changing them into friends, winning them into friends. Love, by the way, does not have to be sentiments. Love your enemy does not mean that you must have feelings for your enemy. You know, Christian love is about what you do, how you act, how you respond. And loving the enemy means that we don't seek to eliminate them. We don't respond to evil with evil, but we always seek, if possible, to transform even our enemies, by responding to evil with good. It's a challenge, but it is a call, and living it out can be very challenging, especially when the enemy is seeking, literally, to erase you completely, to you know, whether it's ethnic cleansing or in genocide—using some really horrible terms, like "mowing the lawn," you know, cutting the grass or something like that, as they described it about these wars on Gaza. So, we need to be challenged by the words of Jesus. But at the same time, let's remember that love your enemy does not mean you should approve...you know the Kairos Palestine document speaks about resisting the evil of the occupation through the logic of love.

It's radical thinking. It's a radical thought that resistance must be rooted in the logic of love. It's resistance that seeks to even liberate the oppressor, because oppression distorts the image of God in both the oppressor and the oppressed. It's about the end goal. The end goal is, hopefully one day we can share the land. It's possible.

If we have the will. Right now, as I said, it's all about survival. Right now, it's all about how do we survive? But we must guard our souls and our spirits from resentment and hatred and the desire to revenge, to avenge. Let God be the judge. Let God, you know, "vengeance is mine says the Lord," and let's continue to be committed to seek good.

Anthony: *Yeah, thank you so much for that. See, one of the things that I've been also struggling with here is the way I speak and how it all has impacted my faith all this year. I remember when I was speaking in the U.S., every single time, whenever I would go to US congressman and say genocide, they would pop up their eyes and start asking me weird questions. How could you ever say it's a genocide? How could you ever say it's ethnic cleansing? How could you even put those words into your mouth while speaking to U.S.*

representatives in the U.S. Congress in Washington, D.C. So all the time where I used to speak, I think that even I, and this type of sense of...even Anthony, be quiet, you cannot speak about this stuff, see what happens.

So now my way of speaking has changed dramatically as of what it was before the war and what has happened after the war. And I could describe it as a way of, I'm not censored anymore, and I do not care what any anything that people have to say, I will say what my people need to hear, what the world needs to hear. And I want to see, how do you feel about, you know, how did you change? Or how your speeches went from what happened before the war, because you used to come to the U.S., even when I was in the United States, you came and visited me, and the way you spoke, how has it changed, relatively?

Reverend Munther: So, I think what you said is important, and right now we definitely have this feeling that I don't care for your emotions. I don't care if I offend you. Just telling you what's happening.

You mentioned something about using terms like genocide or apartheid. We must, at the same time, be ready to defend why these terms actually apply. I think we should be even, it's not about justifying the use of these terms, but asking those who do not use these terms to explain themselves. I think the burden of the proof falls on the other side, to prove that it is not. Given the reports, given the big number of reports, whether it's apartheid or genocide. I think we should not filter ourselves definitely. We should call it for what it is. And I've been arguing that peacemaking definitely involves speaking truth to power and taking sides and calling things by name. If it's apartheid, call it apartheid. If it's a genocide, and you're not calling it a genocide, then you're letting those who commit war crimes go, you're calling it self defense. I guess they were okay. And this, sorry to say, this naive concept of being neutral doesn't work anymore.

You've asked me how I've changed, and you know, I think I'll share this with my students from now on, all the time as a lesson, because this is a lesson. If I stood on Christmas and preach a sermon in which I said, Let's pray for peace, war is terrible. Do you think it would have gone viral? Do you think people would have shared it? No, but I called things for what they are. I said, if you're not calling it to genocide, it's on you. I said, look at the mirror and ask yourself, where was I when Gaza was going through a genocide? Silence is complicity, and these words reach deep into people's conscience, emotions, hearts, and it penetrated in an unprecedented way.

And at the same time, I want to also say something important about this question. How have, you know, we changed. I think I feel more than ever the need to be accurate in our description of what's happening. That's why, in the tour, I kept emphasizing there is no

Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Stop talking about the conflict. It's really important that we use the right terms. There is no conflict. There is no two entities fighting. There is oppression, there is apartheid. Israel is settler colonial entity. They came into a land from Europe and then created the homeland to themselves on our turf, on our land, literally on the ruins of our towns and villages, ethnically cleansed Palestine and established a state. This is the textbook definition of settler colonialism. It's important. Call it for what it is. Stop talking about the conflict as if what we need is peace. What we need is to dismantle colonial ideologies, to dismantle ideologies of supremacists that justify the ethnic cleansing of others. This is what we need to talk about. And similarly, it's when, when we emphasize it is apartheid, because, you know, if we're talking about the conflict, then the response of the church should be, let's pray for peace, and let's try to mediate. If we're talking about apartheid, the response of the church should be let's boycott.

Let's isolate those who commit war crimes until they are held accountable. So, using the right words is important, because it's about, how do we move forward? I feel that for years, the church has been trying, we have been trying to solve the conflict when, in fact, there is no conflict. And maybe that's the problem. And maybe it's not just that we lack the courage, but we chose the convenient way of calling it a conflict and then praying for peace and sounding righteous and noble, because we pray for peace, but we lack the courage to call things for what they are.

Anthony: *Calling for what it is. A million percent. Now, Reverend Munther, I know you have to leave in a bit, but I wanted to ask you the last question, and it's actually of your new book, Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible and the Genocide in Gaza. I would love for you to share a little bit of this book. And first of all, send me a copy when you first publish it, because I'll be the first one to read it. And yeah, please just tell us a little bit about your new book, and what did you think while writing it?*

Reverend Munther: *So, as I say in the book, ironically this is a book I wish I did not have to write. For several reasons. For several reasons. First, I wish there was no genocide to talk about. And second, why I say I wish this is a book I wish I don't have to write is because I wish I do not have to call out the church for not just its complicity but for its role in some cases in empowering and supporting this genocide. There is a chapter in the book that actually goes through the responses of many Christian pastors, theologians, church leaders, official statements by churches. It was a hard chapter to write. It was hard to read and go through what church leaders said about the killing of our people, about the killing of my people, about the killing of siblings of church members and how they justified it, how they made the slaughter of 17,000 children "the justice of God."*

So, the book came as a result of my work in the last 13 months now. How I responded to the war, as I only know as a pastor, to stand by my people and to speak for justice and truth and righteousness and use my convictions. And then, at the same time, ever since the Christ and the rubble manger, I feel God has put me on this path, and it's took me to really unprecedented and unexpected, I mean, places, whether it's Congress or big churches, or interviews, social media, viral videos, tens of millions of views, and so on. So I looked at all of that and decided to put it in a book to explain why we did Christ in the Rubble, to explain what it means—the theology behind it; namely, the solidarity of God with the oppressed. Why I called out the church and what is expected from the church. A big section of the book is actually the context. You know, the things I just said, that it's not a conflict, it's settler colonialism, the inhumane blockade around Gaza that lasted for 16 years before Oct 7. What that meant for the people of Gaza, the fact that they were starting even before the war began. Why it is a genocide. So certainly, there is a part in the book that talks about history and politics, and as I say in the introduction of the book, I feel I have to talk about these things. And as a pastor, talking about these things actually is a pastoral issue to me.

There is a lot of critique to Western theologies that supported this war, and the response to the ideologies of supremacy and Christian Zionism. I talk about why I feel Gaza has divided our world. It became the moral compass of our world. So this book is the culmination of the sermons I gave, the speeches, the interviews, but it's also where research about the history of the context of Gaza and my call to the church today.

Anthony: Thank you so much for that. I want to thank you so much Assis. And honestly, is there anything that you would like to ask me, or anything that we didn't talk about that you want to say before we end?

Reverend Munther: So here is what I would like to end with. I think a year, 13 months after this war started, many of us feel fatigued from continuing to talk about Palestine and Gaza.

But if we truly believe that Palestine and Gaza is like a test case to our world, then we cannot stop talking about Gaza. We cannot accept to live in a world in which those who commit war crimes are not held accountable, they're celebrated.

We cannot allow ourselves to grow numb as if it's just part of life that we receive breaking news, another bombing in Gaza, and as another bomb, another missile, 50 people were killed, including 15 children. And we just said, yeah, we expect this. I think if this happens, then it's about not just our integrity, but our Christian witness. If we believe in the God of righteousness, justice, the God who was embodied in Jesus. Jesus was the embodiment of mercy, compassion, love. And then we turn a blind eye to a genocide, or we get used to a genocide. I think that's seriously wrong.

Therefore, even 13 months after, as we get ready to another Christmas season, let's continue to talk about what's happening in Palestine. Let's continue to plead and pray for a cease fire.

And in times like this, I think we have to be aware that people are looking for a voice of comfort. One of the lessons I've learned throughout the last year from my different traveling and the messages, and I can tell you all my messages I receive on my social media, that many people ask the question, where was the church? Where is the church?

And I say with pain in my heart, I've met so many people who told me we stopped going to church after the war. And they say so for different reasons, some because the church is not talking about Gaza, they're traumatized and the church seems not to care. Or others are troubled by God. Where is God in the midst of this?

And when we are silent, we give also the impression that God does not care. So we need to be where we need to be as a church. The church belongs to the street. The church should lead ministries of healing, of comfort, advocate for justice, and show that the solidarity of God with the oppressed must become our solidarity with the oppressed and marching on us. We must show that, not just in words, but in our actions. When Jesus said, I was a prisoner and you visited me. Visitation means you are present. You are in solidarity with those who are oppressed. This is the role of the church. And as I said, 13 months after the war has started, and Christmas, we hope it's over by then. We cannot stop talking about Gaza, and we cannot stop pleading for justice, for truth and for an end to this war.

Anthony: *Thank you. And I would love to say something that from what you said, yes, people go to church to find a voice of comfort. Yet today, I think it's more important to make people uncomfortable. We're sick of making people comfortable and hearing a word of hope, a word of love and a word of forgiveness when that's not what we want to hear. What we want to say now is make people uncomfortable. And we don't care if you're comfortable or not, it's time for this genocide to stop. And it's honestly horrendous that even after 13 months, we're still asking for a ceasefire, not even a stop to the genocide, but just a ceasefire. It is truly horrific that we have to still be asking for this. But let's continue making people uncomfortable.*

Thank you so much, Assis.

Reverend Munther: *Absolutely.*

Anthony: *Shukran, Assis. And hopefully you talk to me soon.*

Reverend Munther: *Inshallah, I'll talk to you. Thank you. Yalla.*

Anthony: All right. Have a great day.

Reverend Munther: Thank you. Thank you.

Anthony: Bye bye.

Meghan: That was Reverend Munther Isaac, a Lutheran pastor, Palestinian theologian and academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College, and Anthony Khair, a graduate from Bethlehem Bible College who is doing his masters in theology, peace, trauma and religious studies at the University of Amsterdam. If you'd like to hear more from Anthony, check out the June episode of the podcast last year where Christy Kauffman spoke with Anthony in more detail.

We are grateful for all the generous support MCC has received for its response to the crisis in Palestine and Israel. MCC invites listeners to continue to engage in the work by giving, praying, and advocating.

MCC advocacy offices in the U.S. and Canada have put together calls to action that I'll post in the show notes.

Don't leave just yet because at the end of the credits you'll some music from last year's Christ in the Rubble service. A rendition of O, Little Town of Bethlehem, in Arabic.

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This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. This episode was hosted and produced by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Leslie Boctor.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ. Thank you for listening.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

SHOW NOTES:

Current attack on Gaza is one of many: <https://mcc.org/our-stories/current-attack-gaza-one-many>

MCC's statement on Gaza: <https://mcc.org/our-stories/statement-gaza>

"We want the world to stand with us and stop the war:" <https://mcc.org/our-stories/we-want-world-stand-us-and-stop-war>

Marking 75 years of MCC in Palestine and Israel: <https://mcc.org/our-stories/marking-75-years-mcc-palestine-and-israel>

KAIROS Palestine document: <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-kairos/kairos-palestine-document>

Advocacy Actions:

US: <https://mcc.org/campaign/halt-arms-shipments-israel-0>

Canada: <https://mcc.org/campaign/canadas-toolkit-peace-middle-east>