

3<sup>rd</sup> October 2017– For Immediate release

### **“We mustn’t be blind to the ‘Living Stones’ of the Holy Land”**

Over 90 people attended a day of action organised by Christian charity Friends of the Holy Land at the weekend. Keynote speaker Husam Wahhab, a lecturer at Bethlehem University and member of FHL’s Holy Land Committee, gave a vivid account of the isolation felt by West Bank Christians. He spoke of the continued exodus of fellow Christians, and highlighted the imminent danger that the birthplace of Christianity, including the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, could soon have no Christian population at all. Husam stressed the importance of UK Christians reaching out to their family in the Middle East and letting them know they are not forgotten saying:

“We need to see more than just stones in the Holy land- we need to see the Living Stones.”

Husam described a life where water supply was never certain, where travel restrictions meant a visa is needed for a 10-minute visit Jerusalem, and how the treatment of Christians in Iraq and Syria fill his community with fear. Husam said, “Can our children cope with this life? The only thing that is predictable in our future is that it will be unpredictable. Christianity must not be politicised.”

*Officers:*

Chairman: Jim Quinn LL.B, KSG, KC\*HS  
Vice-Chairman & Executive Trustee: Peter Rand, MBE  
Trustee & Director of Finance: Tony Stokes  
Director of Development: Vicki Urch  
Communications Manager: Marion Homer  
Office Manager: Karen Baxter



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Attendees were shocked at what appeared to be such a well-kept secret. Revd. Lynn Boyle, a seasoned Holy Land pilgrimage organiser, explained how even Christians living in East Jerusalem had little idea of the conditions faced by Christians living in Bethlehem saying; "Their deepest desire, Muslim, Jew and Christian is to live without fear and in peace with one another."

Peter Rand Executive Trustee of the charity reported on the success of FHL in reaching these hard to reach Christian communities,

"Each year FHL supports over 2,000 named Christians living in the Middle East. In the last financial year, our donations have risen once again, enabling us to distribute grants of over £550,000 in the West Bank Gaza, Israel and Jordan – an increase of 22% on the previous year".

The National Gathering finished with the 90 plus attendees committing to work with FHL to raise awareness of the challenges faced by Christians in the Middle East through prayer, fundraising and pilgrimage.

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#### **ATTACHMENTS:**

- Image 1: Attendees at FHL's 2017 National Gathering at the Parish Centre St Francis of Assisi Church Kenilworth enjoying lunch
- Image 2: Attendees of FHL's 2017 National Gathering, at St Francis of Assisi Church Kenilworth
- Image 3: FHL Kenilworth volunteer Pam Heighton staffs a busy olive wood stall at FHL's 2017 National Gathering at St Francis of Assisi Church, Kenilworth



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- Image 4: Husam Wahhab, Bethlehem university lecturer and member of FHL's Holy Land Committee at FHL's 2017 National Gathering
- Image 5: FHL Kenilworth volunteers Lyn Morris and Pam staff the olive wood stall at FHL's 2017 National Gathering, at St Francis of Assisi Church, Kenilworth
- Image 6: St Francis of Assisi Church, Kenilworth, venue for FHL's 2017 National Gathering
- Image7: Left to right FHL staff and volunteers: Peter Rand Exec Trustee, Marion Homer Communications Manager, Jim Quinn Chairman, Revd. Lynn Boyle FHL Diocesan

#### **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:**

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[www.facebook.com/FriendsoftheHolyLand](https://www.facebook.com/FriendsoftheHolyLand)

[https://twitter.com/Social\\_FHL](https://twitter.com/Social_FHL)

Registered Charity Number 1130054

#### **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

##### **1. National Gathering Details**

FHL's National Gathering took place on Sat 30 Sept 10.30am – 4.00pm, at the Parish Centre, St Francis of Assisi Church Kenilworth, CV8 1HL.



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## **2. Speakers at the National Gathering**

### **i) Husam Wahhab**

Hussam Wahhab is a member of FHL's Bethlehem based committee and was on his first visit to the UK. He will shared the challenges he faces as a Christian living in Bethlehem, and discussed the impact of FHL, explaining what else needs to be done.

### **ii) Revd. Lynn Boyle**

Revd. Lynn Boyle is vicar of St Paul's Parish, Compstall, Stockport and the FHL Diocesan Coordinator for the Chester Diocese. Since 2004, she has made countless visits to the Holy Land, and is an enthusiastic advocate of engaging with the 'Living Stones'. At the time of the National Gathering Lynn had just returned from an 11-day pilgrimage to the Holy Land including visits to flagship FHL projects such as St Martha's House and the School of Joy.

### **iii) Peter Rand MBE – FHL Vice Chairman and Executive Trustee**

Peter is the principle link between FHL in the UK and the Committee in the Holy Land. Peter visits the West Bank 4 or 5 times/year, as well as supporting the growth of FHL in the UK. Peter says,

“I will always be grateful to our founder, Michael Whelan, for introducing me to Friends of the Holy Land. My first pilgrimage in March 2010 made an impact on me that I could never have anticipated. Every time I visit I witness changes to the lives of many Christians because of the generosity of time, money and resources of so many of our supporters in this country. To have seen the continued growth of our impact over there - 22% more grants made this year compared to last year - has been humbling.”



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### **3. Who are 'Friends of the Holy Land'?**

In the past seventy years, the Christian people of the Holy Land have been under increasing economic and political pressure and the Christian population has steadily fallen. Friends of the Holy Land, is an apolitical and ecumenical charity, existing to help and support the Christian population of the West Bank, Gaza, Israel and Jordan, and to develop a resilient and enduring Christian community there. The charity has the active support of both Catholic and Anglican Bishops and patrons include both Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster and the Rt.Hon. Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury. Cases are identified and verified by our Holy Land Committee, who are a mix of lay and clerical officers, including Revd. Hosam Naoum, Dean of St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem.

### **4. FHL's objectives:**

- To raise awareness of the challenges facing the Christians of the Holy Land
- To encourage prayers for Christians living in the Holy Land
- To generate and channel financial resources to give them a sustainable future
- To encourage visits to the Holy Land to meet local Christians

### **5. Christians in the Holy Land**

Bethlehem and Jerusalem once bustled with local Christians. The Holy Land, birthplace of Christianity, is central to the Christian faith, but now less than 200,000 Christians remain there, representing between 1% and 2% of the population. Those who do remain suffer restrictions to travel, high levels of unemployment, poverty, poor living conditions, a shortage of social services and affordable health care, and feel a constant uncertainty about their present and future.



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FHL believes that the Holy Land must not become a cultural museum to Christianity. It must continue to be the home of a vibrant, secure, thriving Christian community, the 'Living Stones' of our faith. We support Christian people and communities, especially children and the elderly, to help them stay there, improve their lives and develop the resilience they need to survive the many difficulties they face.

## **6. Supporting Christians in the Holy Land**

Many international agencies are active in the Holy Land, supporting major projects. FHL concentrates on smaller, sustainable projects that quickly make a big difference to local Christian families, especially the most vulnerable. Our projects fall into four main categories and provide a mixture of immediate relief and sustainable support;

- *Education*

FHL supports education in the Holy Land as a vital way to ensure the future of Christian communities, funding students at schools and universities when this is beyond the resources of their families. We also support the School of Joy, offering education for children with special needs.

- *Employment*

We provide 'seed corn' funding to help new businesses and generate employment, particularly for young people.

- *Health*

We fund medicines, operations and hospital visits, and contribute to the hospital treatment of the neediest Christians at St Luke's Episcopal Hospital in Nablus and the Medical Centre for Diabetes and Cardiovascular Diseases in Ramallah. Since its foundation in 2009 FHL has supported St Martha's House,



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the first day-care centre for elderly women in Bethlehem.

- *Housing*

We support projects to divide family houses into two units, and to repair and renovate family homes.

Many of FHL's projects are in the West Bank, where most of the Christian families of the Holy Land remain, although work is undertaken in Gaza, Israel and in Jordan, where FHL is supporting Christian Iraqi refugees.

## **7. Pilgrimage**

FHL believes that Christian pilgrims should visit the Holy Places of our faith and spend time with the Christian people of the Holy Land, to observe the difficulties they face and experience the insecurity that is a major part of their lives. It is also the best way to show support, friendship, affection and gratitude, and to let them know they are not alone.

FHL supports the Christian economy by encouraging pilgrimage companies to use Christian owned restaurants, hotels and transportation companies whenever possible.

FHL believe that locally based Christian tour operators can provide the best experience for Christian Pilgrims.



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## **8. Organisation**

FHL has a National Management Committee reporting to a Board of Trustees who meet regularly to guide their work in the Holy Land, review progress and plan future projects. The Trustees ensure full accountability for funds raised and distributed by FHL and its partners. They also have a Holy Land Committee with an office and a small team of staff in Bethlehem, with its roots in the Christian community, to advise on local issues and identify areas for our support. FHL supporters are mainly organised through church groups across England and Wales. Each group has a team to organise fundraising events and increase awareness of the many issues facing Christians in the Holy Land.

FHL's website is [www.friendsoftheholylan.org.uk](http://www.friendsoftheholylan.org.uk)

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