



Crisis in Bethlehem

Update from Ambassador Michele Burke Bowe
President, Holy Family Hospital of Bethlehem Foundation

March 2020

The Hospital and Foundation celebrated a great year in 2019. The doctors and midwives delivered a record number of babies, bringing 4,736 new lives into the world. The Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) treated some 450 babies nurturing and restoring them to good health. This included 18 babies born earlier than 28 weeks, weighing less than two pounds. The Mobile Medical Clinic continued its daily rounds caring for pregnant women, older women, newborns and young children. In many instances, this is the only healthcare available in the Bedouin communities of Area C due to funding cuts from the global community. The clinic serves as a literal lifeline in these forgotten communities.

Holy Family Hospital provides critical services in a region where there is a shortage of doctors and healthcare professionals. Perhaps, more importantly, the Hospital creates employment directly or indirectly providing 172 jobs with benefits and a pension plan. Holy Family Hospital creates hope for the region and provides an ecumenical workplace where Christians and Muslims work together to save the lives of the most vulnerable mothers and babies in the Holy Land.

The Foundation experienced record generosity closing 2019 with donations totaling \$2,472,581 from over 1800 individual donors, foundations, churches, parishes and religious organizations from around the world. The Foundation board met in February 2020 and set ambitious fundraising goals and disbursements to the Hospital. The 2020 Foundation budget includes sending \$1,408,000 to the Hospital for operations and clinics and \$1,800,000 for the ongoing construction of the new hospital wing which is slated for completion in 2021.

In 2019, Bethlehem tourism sector broke all previous records. As many as 500 tour buses of pilgrims entered the city and hotels ran at full occupancy. There were times when there was no room at the inns in Bethlehem during 2019. The tourism sector carried the public sector which was suffering from aid moratoriums. The salary cuts from the government were less impactful due to increased tourism revenue at hotels, restaurants and tour companies.



A Primary Work of the Order of Malta

This all changed when on March 5, 2020 COVID 19 found its way into Bethlehem resulting in a total closure and geographic isolation for the city and surrounding region. All tourists were evacuated, save a small group under quarantine and the checkpoints closed allowing no exits or entries. Every restaurant, hotel, bank and school will be closed for a minimum 30-day state of emergency furloughing all employees without pay. All of the holy sites, places of worship and tourist attractions are also closed. The usual 200,000 Palestinians who cross into Jerusalem to work were furloughed without pay because of the border closure. Today, it is estimated that a mere 10% of the workforce is receiving salaries.

Holy Family Hospital remains open and committed to caring for the most vulnerable mothers and babies of the region. The staff is diminished due to the number of employees who must stay home to take care of children not at school. Additionally, a few staff are quarantined due to some recent travel. One of the operating rooms has been recommissioned as an isolation ward for infected patients. The infection control measures have been stepped up in alignment with Palestinian Health Ministry and WHO protocols. The remaining staff are working longer hours and ensuring that the doors of the Hospital are open to all without regard to need or creed. The Hospital remains a cheerful and welcoming place dedicated to the highest standards of care.

The construction workers are staying home to avoid contamination from the virus and there is no work on the Hospital expansion site. The architect is looking into this situation to determine whether the work stoppage is sanctioned by the municipality or just the preference of the workers.

The economic impact of Covid 19 has quickly devastated the local Bethlehem economy. This in turn greatly impacts the Hospital and Foundation. Given the already fragile economy in Bethlehem, the prospects of several weeks or more without salaries are unimaginable. The current 50% subsidy for all Hospital services which has allowed the families of Bethlehem to access care at the Hospital, will no longer suffice. The social workers who traditionally work closely with poorer families to determine sliding scale payments are already encountering families who don't have enough money for food, let alone medical care. The risk that women might start to deliver at home to avoid hospital fees is growing.

Holy Family Hospital Foundation is committed to meeting the healthcare needs of the families of Bethlehem. The patient fees for this time with no salary will fall to almost nothing as 75 % of the households who come to the hospital earn less than \$800 per month. This means that the Hospital will need to find ways to cut already thin expenses and to look for additional revenue. The Foundation will redouble its efforts to find new private and institutional donors to ensure that the Mothers of Bethlehem can deliver their babies in a safe, clean hospital and that premature and sick newborns will have the chance to survive.

Please keep the Hospital, its staff and the families of the Holy Land in your prayers along with the fundraising success of the Foundation for 2020.



A Primary Work of the Order of Malta