

## **Views from the Pews - Please pray for Sally Azar**

This last week brought yet more news from Jerusalem. Amid the military and political turmoil the Lutheran Church in the Holy Land ordained its first woman pastor, Sally Azar. She will minister both in English and in Arabic to the small Lutheran Palestinian community in and around Jerusalem. That's significant because the two dominant faiths in the region – Judaism and Islam – are still struggling to make any space for ordained women, as is the Roman Catholic Church, which has a significant presence in the area.

The Protestant churches have a major role to play in what has become a flashpoint once again – the very soil that Jesus, the Prophets, the Disciples and many Apostles once trod on. If any faith grouping has any chance of being recognized as at least partially neutral in a place where the middle ground is being emptied rapidly, it is a grouping of Protestant churches, too small to be a threat to the main players, but large enough to make a difference in a place where neutrality will be a rare and prized commodity.

This story is also a warning to us about stereotyping; unless you dig deeply and prayerfully, it's easy to equate the word 'Palestinian' with negative labels like 'insurgent' (a favourite of many news sources). In truth, Palestinians come in many colours and shapes, and we do well to remind ourselves that there is a significant Christian population among them, a population with the courage and foresight to begin ordaining women.

So hit the internet and learn what you can of this complex place, which is much much more than just the site of familiar Biblical events, or of the Crusades (which themselves merit fresh study and understanding). Gaza and Israel host hundreds of World War One graves. Those deaths paved the way for the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, creating a vacuum that two competing faiths have fought to control for a century now.

Anglicans have a presence there too, and do we know enough about them either? The churches have a God-sent opportunity for an

outward-looking ministry with everything to play for, including gender equality in a region where too often gender roles are weaponised. Please pray for the work of the churches in the Holy Land.

Lastly, see if you can find pictures of Sally Azar's packed ordination service – you could easily mistake them for Anglicans.

*Richard*  
Swarbrick