



# Together We Succeed

## The Bethlehem Development Foundation



By Hani Abu-Dayyeh

**T**he Bethlehem Development Foundation (BDF) was launched in 2012 by the late Mr. Said T. Khoury. His vision aimed to transform Bethlehem into a vibrant spiritual destination – worthy of the place that witnessed the birth of Jesus Christ, who spread the message of Love and Peace for all humanity. The foundation seeks to improve the quality of life for Bethlehem's residents and make the city attractive to local and international visitors. It aims to create a sustainable infrastructure and economic and social environment in the Bethlehem governorate to foster the long-term growth of a fully integrated, prosperous, and harmonious community. Indeed, BDF has been outstandingly successful and has achieved numerous milestones in various fields.

At BDF's request, one of the world's leading urban planning firms conducted a comprehensive urban analysis that delivered a feasibility study and a strategic master plan for the area's rehabilitation. Using available expertise, BDF selected socially and economically viable projects to restore the holy city. It has been raising funds among its wider community of local, regional, and international public, private, and institutional investors who will collectively integrate to revitalize Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour. All concerned stakeholders agree that tourism will act as the local development driver, and the associated employment generation will help alleviate poverty. The principles of sustainable



Al-Salam Garden, Beit Jala.



Solid-waste collection vehicle.



Testing the basket at the opening of the Muallem Said Khoury Sports Complex.

tourism, as outlined by the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), will help achieve a balance between the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development and guarantee long-term benefits to the recipient communities. Accordingly, BDF projects aim to make optimal use of environmental resources, maintain essential ecosystems, and help conserve biodiversity. They respect socio-cultural authenticity, conserve built and living cultural heritage, contribute to cross-cultural understanding and tolerance, and strive to ensure that long-term socio-economic benefits – which include income-generating and stable employment opportunities, social services, and poverty alleviation – are fairly distributed among all

community stakeholders. These bottom-line principles of sustainable development safeguard environmental, economic, and cultural returns on investment. Another associated benefit of well-managed tourism is that both visitors and residents deepen their understanding of the city's rich cultural and religious heritage.

The stringent controls imposed by the military occupation on development all across Palestine since 1967 have heavily affected Bethlehem, where with the traditional tourism model, short-term rewards frequently outranked long-term planning. The issues transcend overcrowding, as reckless development harms the environment, degrades scenery, and disrupts local culture. Delicate historical, archaeological,



and natural sites suffer physical wear and tear. Very importantly, the old models channeled tourism revenues away from local communities. A study conducted a few years ago found that for every dollar tourists spend in Bethlehem, 85 cents revert back to the Israeli economy.

To best achieve long-term benefits, BDF is working closely with the various stakeholders, helping facilitate their dialogue with the private and public sectors, creating interchange among parties that otherwise might not collaborate or understand how their decisions reverberate down a destination's tourism value chain.

Since 2012, BDF has elevated Christmas to international prominence using world-renowned decorators and planners and attracting international media. In 2016, the Bethlehem Christmas tree was voted one of the top ten Christmas trees worldwide by international media outlets. As Bethlehem is a major Palestinian window to the rest of the world,

a well-recognized international brand, this intervention has helped emphasize the centrality of Bethlehem in Christmas celebrations worldwide. It also has increased international and local tourism, with droves of visitors attending the Christmas tree-lighting ceremony during what used to be a very low tourism season. These efforts have helped instill a sense of pride and appreciation among all Palestinian communities, both Christians and Muslims.

Since the Oslo Agreement, room capacity has grown tremendously, and nine more hotels will open very soon while others are in the planning stage. Attractive new souvenir shops line the main roads in Bethlehem and Beit Sahour, indicating the growth of the souvenir sector and contributing effectively to the revitalization of the craft industry. As the food services sector has expanded massively in Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, and Beit Jala, not only internal tourists but also Palestinians from the West

Bank, Jerusalem, and the 1948 areas of Palestine seek Bethlehem as a destination for day trips. Besides the cultural-heritage and religious sites, they enjoy the many specialized restaurants that Bethlehem has to offer.



The tourism-associated services have contributed to the economic regeneration of the Bethlehem region and increased employment among the young, well-educated segments of the population, particularly among the Palestinian Christian community, reversing earlier trends. Tourism development requires services, including the provision of access, security, food, housing, transportation, communication, souvenirs, and more – which in turn requires qualified personnel such as guides, chefs, drivers, transportation companies, police, and street vendors. To help meet the challenge of supplying the needed human resources, Bethlehem University has stepped forward and is investing in tourism education and training to the tune of US\$30 million. It purchased three iconic buildings, known as the Mount David property, and dedicated this biggest development in years to the hospitality department and tourism education. Two of these buildings will provide a 95-room training hotel and a training restaurant, while the third is dedicated

to cultural education and development. Work on the site is ongoing.

Furthermore, BDF actively participates in the yearly Diaspora Convention in efforts to reconnect the diaspora community, many of whom are Christians, with the city of their origin. Most important is the ongoing effort to help raise funds for the urgently needed renovation of the Church of the Nativity, allowing visitors to see for the first time in 600 years ancient mosaics and columns that have been restored to their original glory.

City officials hope that these renovations will boost tourism and the economy, and perhaps slow a decades-long drain of the Christian population from the lands where the

Christmas Tree Lighting.



Christian faith was born. “Christians are leaving the Holy Land due to economic hardship and the lack of peace, and we are struggling to keep them in their homeland,” said former Bethlehem Mayor Anton Salman. “This is one of the ways.”

In partnership with the Embassy of the State of Palestine to the Holy See, the exhibition Bethlehem Reborn is another effort by the BDF to market Bethlehem. It highlights the beautiful restoration efforts at the Church of the Nativity in which a team of experts has exposed the stunning mosaics and enhanced and exposed the beautiful and historic painting on the columns. The restoration efforts started at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, when tourism came to a complete halt, and the idea arose that if the pilgrims and tourists could not come to Bethlehem, BDF would bring Bethlehem to them. It is hoped that after viewing the beautiful exhibition, visitors will want to come and see things for themselves. The exhibition was first displayed in the Vatican, then in Rimini, Aquileia, and other Italian cities. The panels were then translated into German and the exhibition was held in Cologne. Now BDF, in cooperation with Taisir Hasbun, the exhibition’s curator, is engaged in discussions with other German

cities that might host this exhibition. UNESCO is bringing it to Paris this October and serious discussions are ongoing regarding a plan for two successive years of exhibitions to be held at the Bible Museum in Washington, DC. The first is scheduled to start on November 9, 2022.

A tourism product needs promotion, even if “only” by word of mouth. BDF aims to spread the knowledge of Bethlehem as a tourism destination beyond visits to the church and purchases at a souvenir shop. We encourage you to remain in Bethlehem longer than a day, to stay in one of Bethlehem’s beautiful hotels, and to enjoy the great variety of experiences that Bethlehem and its surroundings have to offer.

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A detailed mosaic replica of the seventh angel, *Bethlehem Reborn* Exhibition in Cologne, Germany.

First and second sections of the *Bethlehem Reborn* Exhibition in Aquileia, northern Italy.

