



HOLY FAMILY HOSPITAL of Bethlehem Foundation

Blessed Beginnings President's Report Ambassador Michele B. Bowe October 2024

Babies born at Holy Family Hospital have blessed beginnings. Maha, a young mother, told me babies born at our Hospital are double blessed because they are born in Bethlehem and because the nurses and doctors are gentle and kind. “They wrap the babies in soft blankets and give them a homemade hat. They even let us mothers take naps while they care for our newborns in the nursery. They reminded my husband to hold my hand during labor and encouraged me when I felt too tired to go on. When I was afraid, they comforted me.” All babies should have such blessed beginnings.

Outside the Hospital, the town of Bethlehem is tense. It has been a year now since 90% of the workforce last received salaries. Prices keep rising, especially for food and electricity. Winter is coming and families wonder if they will be able to heat their homes. Bread consumption has quadrupled. Compared to other food, bread is inexpensive and readily available.

In response to this increased poverty, the Holy Family Hospital Foundation is redoubling its efforts to help keep the Hospital properly funded. The Hospital Board of Directors has re-committed the Hospital to paying full salaries to all employees, on time. In a place like Bethlehem, where credit is scarce, many businesses balance their cashflows on the backs of employees. Holy Family Hospital does not; thanks to your generosity, we have kept our promise to pay employees full salaries on time.

Casting aside the worries of the outside world, our employees still rejoice at the birth of each baby, greeting the patients cheerfully. I think the warm hospitality that Bethlehem is known for feels a little warmer these days. The staff enjoy working in our Hospital, and the retention rate of employees is close to 100%. Employees stay until retirement, and many are not the first generation in their families to work at Holy Family Hospital.

The staff ensures that the Hospital maintains a culture of care and welcome, not just for the patients but for one another. They share their meals and always have a cup of hot coffee to offer to maintain the energy it takes each year to deliver more than 4,300 babies and care for over 515 sick and premature babies in the NICU. They do their part, and then some.

Recently, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Cardinal Pizzaballa, wrote a letter to the members of the Christian community urging them to stay. He said that the Christians of the Holy Land receive a call to live in that land and to build their futures there. He wrote, “We cannot give up, there is always hope...we can give our children a reason to hope for the future.” Our Hospital is a reason for hope.

When I reflect upon the words of the Patriarch, I am reminded that the directive for those Christians is clear. I wonder, then, what is our call? What are we called to do as the Christians outside of Bethlehem and the rest of the Holy Land? I believe that we are called to support our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land and, as Pope Francis wrote in a recent letter, to be close to those who are doing their best to remain. Our prayers and our generosity magnify the hope in Bethlehem.



A Primary Work of the Order of Malta

Holy Family Hospital not only provides hope through delivering new life, quality employment, and training opportunities, but also as a force for economic leaven for the entire Bethlehem community. We source supplies and equipment locally. We employ 220 Palestinians, directly or indirectly. We provide an ecumenical workplace where Christians and Muslims work together, serving the mothers and babies of Bethlehem without regard to need or creed.



I spent time visiting our NICU. It was uplifting to witness the competence of the staff and to see the many ways they share hope with the parents of the sick and premature babies. The NICU was caring for 16 babies, 10 of them born at or before 28 weeks. These tiny babies, as small as one pound, were nestled in highly specialized incubators. At least 8 of them were born septic, due to their mothers' lack of nutrition and the increased anxiety everyone in the region experiences every day. One baby, although born at 36 weeks, required constant support and was difficult to stabilize. I was praying she would survive even as her condition deteriorated. Her parents, who visited daily, were older and she was their only child. A few days ago, the prayers of many were answered when this baby suddenly began to improve and, shortly later, go home. I consider this yet another of the miracles worked by Holy Family Hospital. The Hospital staff modestly say they just followed the protocol and did their jobs. They said that God is the author of life, and he makes the miracles.

Deliveries at the Hospital are down this year because of road closures and checkpoints that have been set up all over the region. But the Hospital's workload remains the same, as deliveries are more complicated and more babies need Level III NICU care. **Medical care is increasingly viewed as a luxury, with families choosing between health care and groceries. The medical subsidies we provide are now at 75% for the services which are not ordinarily free of charge, like those provided through the Mobile Clinic and the Menopause Clinic.** The Hospital's social workers are busy counseling patients and offering sliding scale fees for the poorest families.

We recently hired 2 new employees, including a dedicated driver and a maintenance employee. It feels like a big win when we can extend high quality employment to one more individual. In the Bethlehem culture of care, our staff members make their tables longer, and many support a dozen extended family members. In Bethlehem, in this time of crisis, there are not enough social service programs. The focus in the region is on other areas of conflict and Bethlehem goes forgotten. To address this, the Holy Family Hospital Foundation partners with the local parish to provide grocery cards for 150 families. The social worker vets each family and helps with the cost of electricity and pharmaceuticals as well. The Bethlehem grocers and pharmacists generously offer us a 20% discount so that we can care for more families.



Reducing food insecurity for young families makes for healthier babies and less complicated deliveries. Our highly subsidized prenatal care increases participation, supporting better maternity outcomes.

Holy Family Hospital Foundation responds generously to the cry of the poor women and children of Bethlehem, thanks to your ongoing kindness. Our Foundation magnifies hope when perhaps it is beginning to waver. Together, we can accompany the families of Bethlehem from afar by providing the highest quality health care, employment, rejoicing in the gift of new life. After all, is there anything more hopeful than a newborn baby?

Please pray for peace, reconciliation, and the gift of hope,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Bowe".

Ambassador Michele Burke Bowe, GCM
President, Holy Family Hospital Foundation



A Primary Work of the Order of Malta