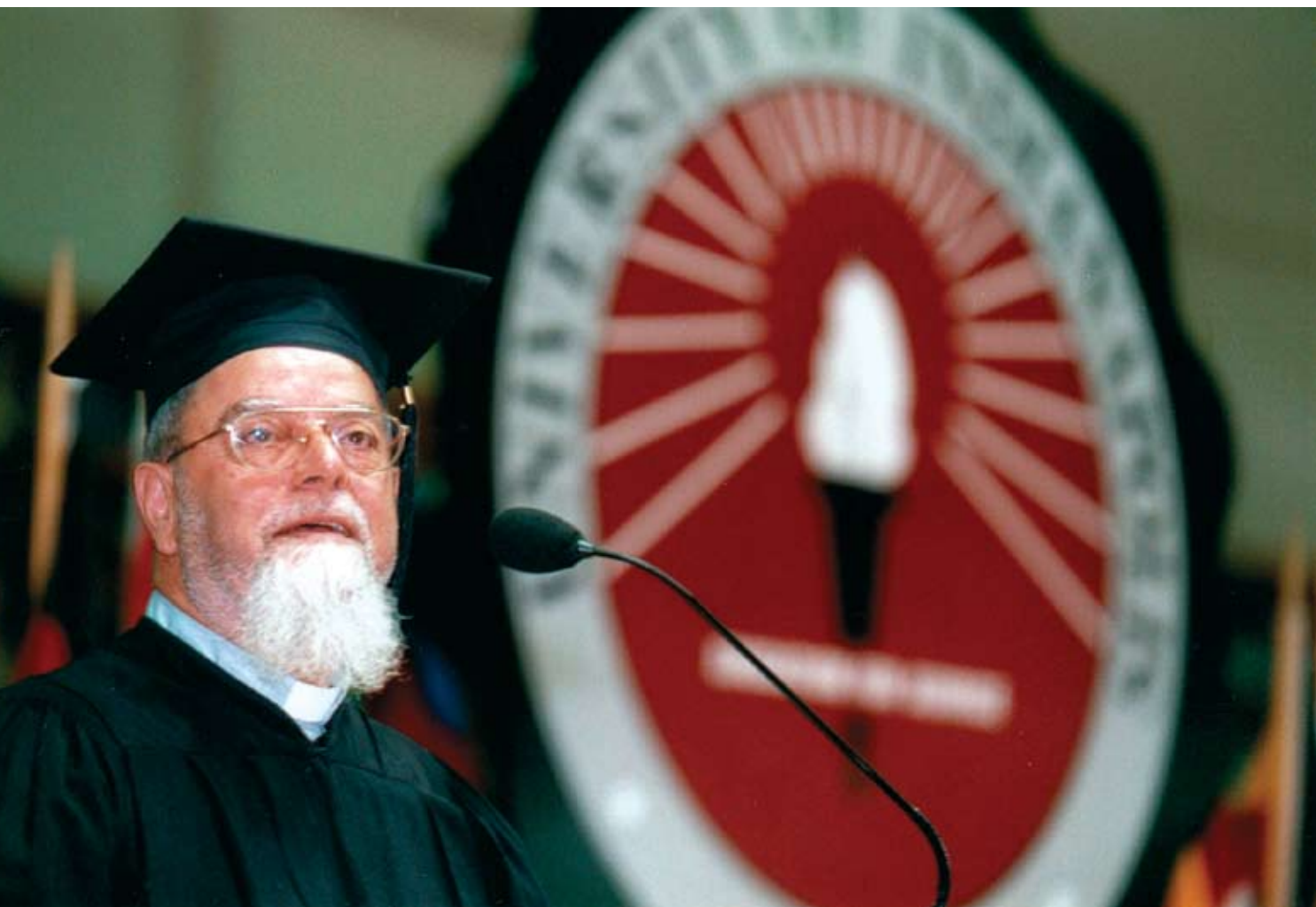


SERVING IN THE WILDERNESS:  
FATHER ELIAS CHACOUR & MAR ELIAS UNIVERSITY

By Rebecca Blair '80



## *Elias Chacour*

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me’ (Matthew 28:10). Father Elias Chacour, a priest in the Melkite Catholic Church, which dates back to the Byzantine period of Constantine, heard Christ’s words literally in his heart. They were words that impelled him to journey to Ibillin, a Palestinian town in Galilee, whose three thousand residents came from many smaller villages after the disbursement of the Palestinians and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, to establish a Christian ministry of education and hope.

Chacour began his Ibillin ministry as a temporary parish priest in 1965 under the mountain called Jabal AlGhoul, the Mountain of Shadows. Like the Methodist circuit riders in America, the priest traveled through the wilderness, a rocky desert with no utilities or roads, to bind together individual and communal relationships with his words and his presence. Absorbed in his work, Chacour notes that the Bishop of Haifa soon forgot about him, out there in the wilderness. And, indeed, Chacour himself became singularly riveted to his mission of establishing a thriving community in the midst of apparent desolation. He worked to build a community center, which temporarily housed a high school, followed by a library and kindergarten. Mariam Bawardi Kindergarten, established in 1968, prepares children up to age 6 for study at the elementary school. At that time, the Palestinian children of Ibillin were provided admission to the Israeli public education system, but many could not attend school regularly because they could not afford to purchase supplies, or they had no means to travel the long distances to and from the Israeli schools.

Chacour, whom the local residents call Abuna, the respectful, affectionate Arabic term for “father,” reclaimed the Bishop’s attention quickly when, after identifying the need for better educational facilities for the area youth, he petitioned the Bishop for permission to build a high school on a piece of land owned by the Melkite Church. Reluctantly, the Bishop agreed, but the Israeli governmental authorities refused to issue a building permit for six years. Undeterred, Chacour organized the beginning of the building project anyway, declaring that “peace does not need contemplators; it needs actors, people who are willing to get their hands dirty and do something.”<sup>1</sup>



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Under cover of darkness, work crews from Ibillin began to carry away rocks and dig footings in the crusty soil. On several occasions, the construction work was interrupted by the Israeli police, yet each time the crews returned after a brief interval to push ahead slowly with the work. Realizing that the project was in jeopardy of becoming caught up in political conflict and red tape, Chacour flew to Washington in 1981 to seek assistance from then Secretary of State James Baker. On his next Middle Eastern diplomatic mission, Baker quietly intervened by hand-delivering a letter to the Israeli government supporting the initiatives of the Mar Elias Educational Institutions. Within nine months, the first building opened to admit students, the space inside designated as “an oasis of peace for all regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or religious affiliation.”<sup>2</sup> The high school building opened with eighty students and four teachers in 1982, followed by an additional building in 1989. Of the one hundred teachers in the high school currently, some are Muslim, some Christian, while others are Jewish. Secretary Baker has lauded the project’s purpose, commenting to Chacour, “What you are doing here is the key to peace and reconciliation, because what you are trying to establish is a pluralistic institution of learning.”<sup>3</sup> The accompanying teaching center trains instructors in pedagogies for culturally-diverse classes.

In a symbolic recognition of the project’s relationship to its political and geographic location, the nearby mountain was renamed Jabal al Nuur, the Mountain of Light, when the school opened.

Father Chacour has asserted that, in his view, the majority of Palestinians desire peace. “Palestinians,” he affirms, “want to be able to live in a land many have called home for hundreds of years without oppression and discrimination. The world does not need any more enemies, but common friends.”<sup>4</sup> This wisdom comes from Chacour’s own life experience. Born in 1939 in the village of Biram in Upper Galilee, or Arab Palestine, to a Palestinian Christian family, Elias Chacour experienced early on the personal consequences of political upheaval. At age eight, Chacour and his family were temporarily evicted, along with members of their village, by the Israeli government for security reasons. They returned to find their houses bulldozed by the Israelis, who had claimed that portion of Palestine as part of the Israeli state. Having witnessed the suffering and destruction wrecked upon individual lives by the political actions of governments, Chacour committed himself to his priestly vocation more purposefully with the aim of ministering to such suffering on the ground where it occurs.



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The process of working into and through vocation—the recognition of an inner calling and its translation into an outer call—is detailed in his book *Blood Brothers*. Chacour’s vocation has impressed upon him the need to highlight our common humanity as a means to realize peace: “I was born a baby in the image and likeness of God, not more, and not less either. Jews are also born babies in the image and likeness of God. It is good for them to have a homeland and freedom of expression, but not if it means that someone else is to be homeless and not have freedom of expression.”<sup>5</sup> He continues, affirming that we are all human children of God, and therefore, we make mistakes. However, we are also called by God, he insists, to live together in peace and share all that God has given us. And we must educate one another in this latter shared vocation.

The vision to educate the youth of Ibillin has grown over time into a dream to educate all the children of Israel together, a model by which they might learn to live and work, worship and study in peace. As Father Chacour observes, “We want to improve the social, educational, and economic status of the Palestinians in Israel, but, more importantly, we want to create a mentality of self-reliance, restore shattered self-esteem, and provide dignity. It is a matter of building bridges among the members of the same family: Christians, Jews, Moslems, and Druze. This is the meaning of ‘becoming God-like.’”<sup>6</sup>

Such a broad vision, it became increasingly clear, could not be realized without international concern and participation. In a collaborative gesture of global community several volunteers from around the world made their own vocational pilgrimages to Palestine to work on the various building projects in the Mar Elias complex, including a prayer grotto, administrative office building, guest dormitories, and a peace garden.

Mar Elias College, established by the work of such volunteers in 1994, offers a two-year certificate for post-secondary students in Computer Technology, Engineering, Visual Arts, Architecture, and Business

Administration. Forty of the fifty college faculty members hold doctorates in their disciplinary fields, and the college’s enrollment has grown to more than four thousand students. The College has twice received the Israeli Award of Excellence for College Education.

By 2002 Mar Elias Educational Institutions had celebrated twenty years of providing a high-quality education to students of all ages. Yet, the vision of Father Chacour had not yet been fully realized. Beginning in 2000, Father Chacour initiated a series of conversations with Dr. Jerry Israel, President of the University of Indianapolis, to outline his vision of an educational partnership to establish a university branch campus in which Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze students might live, learn, and work towards a common future. Chacour chose the University of Indianapolis because, as a college rooted in the United Brethren and United Methodist faith traditions, its mission of education for service matched Chacour’s action-oriented approach to achieve peace through education. These initial meetings established agreements detailing the initial joint curriculum and a plan to work toward meeting North Central Association accreditation standards as well as those established by the Israeli Committee for Higher Education.

After three years of planning, the Committee for Higher Education in Israel approved the plan in 2003, granting initial accreditation for Mar Elias University, in partnership with the University of Indianapolis, to offer baccalaureate degree programs in communications, computer science, and environmental science/chemistry. With the stroke of a pen, Mar Elias University and the University of Indianapolis each gained a valuable education partner and a branch campus abroad. As a part of this accreditation, the University of Indianapolis has made the commitment to supply faculty to teach at least thirty percent of the courses and has affirmed that the degree programs offered are identical in content and quality to those offered on the Indianapolis campus.



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Classes in these programs began in October, 2003. Faculty exchange began with Dr. Zvi Sever, a biologist from Mar Elias, taught a graduate education course in zoology on the Indianapolis campus during the 2003 Summer Term. A group of more than 50 students from the Mar Elias campus studied in Indianapolis during the summer of 2005. Faculty from Mar Elias also taught at UIndy in the summer of 2005. In the spring of 2005 Dr. Paul Krasnovsky (Music Department) taught courses on the Ibillin campus and Provost Emeritus Lynn Youngblood taught courses at MEEI in the fall of 2005.

At the opening of Mar Elias University, Father Chacour affirmed that this “model of academic excellence and research combined with pluralistic living, in which differences are acknowledged and respected, will provide a much-needed beacon of hope in the Middle East.”<sup>7</sup> It remains to be seen what the long-term significance of Chacour’s lifework in the village of Ibillin will be, but his example has proven to be inspiring to countless people including more than a few faculty, staff and students at the University of Indianapolis. Provost Emeritus Lynn Youngblood speaks for many Mar Elias supporters when he states, “Some of us dream that university graduates of Mar Elias/University of Indianapolis might some day be the bridge builders for permanent peace

between two traditionally adversarial cultures. These students are truly unique in that they have a foot in both camps in that they are Arabs—hence related to the Muslim side of the conflict—but also Israeli citizens, thereby connected to the Jewish side. On top of this, they will have had a Christian education, in its broadest sense.” Meanwhile, as more and more students, faculty, and staff at UIndy learn about the remarkable life and work of “Abuna” Chacour, they are inspired to engage in conversations beyond their own faith communities to embrace the hope of interfaith peacemaking.

Indeed, living into hope is the essential gift that Father “Abuna” Chacour offers to those in Ibillin, the Middle East, and the world. It is only by grasping the vision of light in the darkness of ethnic and racial conflict, political upheaval, and violent bloodshed that we can find a reason, a mission for continuing to live in and care about such a world. Moreover, when we live into hope, our identities are markedly transformed. By holding out the possibility that the world is not forever lost to us and is capable of being redeemed, we claim a vocation of service in the world, assured that we are traveling the most meaningful path, even if the terrain grows rocky and desolate, even if that path leads us into wilderness.

— Honorary Degree 2001

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More information about Mar Elias Educational Institutions can be found at <http://www.meei.org>. Fr. Chacour has written several books about his life and work in Ibillin. These include *Blood Brothers* with David Hazard (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1984) and *We Belong to the Land: The Story of a Palestinian Israeli Who Lives for Peace and Reconciliation* with Mary E. Jensen (San Francisco, CA: HarperSan Francisco, 1990). In February 2006, Fr. Chacour was consecrated as archbishop of Haifa and the Galilee in the Melkite Catholic Church.

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### *Elias Chacour by Rebecca Blair & Michael G. Cartwright*

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted from a question and answer session with Father Chacour at [http://lunker.faculty.ltss.edu/Elias\\_Chacour.htm](http://lunker.faculty.ltss.edu/Elias_Chacour.htm)
- <sup>2</sup> Description of the dedication ceremonies found at <http://www.meei.org>
- <sup>3</sup> Baker quotation found at <http://www.m-e-c.org>
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted from a question and answer session with Father Chacour at [http://lunker.faculty.ltss.edu/Elias\\_Chacour.htm](http://lunker.faculty.ltss.edu/Elias_Chacour.htm)
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted from a question and answer session with Father Chacour at [http://lunker.faculty.ltss.edu/Elias\\_Chacour.htm](http://lunker.faculty.ltss.edu/Elias_Chacour.htm)
- <sup>6</sup> Quotation from <http://www.m-e-c.org>
- <sup>7</sup> Quotation from <http://www.uindy.edu/news/israel.html>
- <sup>8</sup> For a reflection about the theological significance of the peaceable witness of the Christians of Ibillin see, Michael G. Cartwright's essay "Being Sent—Witness" for *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* edited by Samuel Wells and Stanley Hauerwas (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 481-494.