



## **Leader's Guide for *We Belong to the Land***

by Donald L. Griggs\*

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### **Introduction**

The 24 chapters of *We Belong to the Land* recall in Father Elias Chacour's words his experiences from 1965 when he began his ministry as a young priest assigned to the small village of Ibillin to 1989 and the high school graduation ceremony. It is a remarkable story of the life and ministry of a remarkable man endowed by God with incredible gifts of knowledge of Holy scripture, wisdom to speak truth in critical moments of conflict, courage to confront authorities who would deny him his human rights, faith to persevere in times of stress and deprivation, and a vision for what is needed to restore peace in the troubled land of Israel/Palestine.

As one who will lead individuals or a group to reflect on what they have read in this book there are several approaches you could take:

1. When you distribute the book to individuals you could provide the list of questions that are presented below, encouraging the readers to take some time after reading each chapter to reflect on the questions for that chapter.
2. If you are leading a group that is meeting for several sessions, you could select a question or two from the chapters for each session to guide the discussion.
3. You could send an email to the participants including questions that will be the focus for an upcoming session.
4. You could duplicate or send via email to the participants just the four pages of maps and photos before gathering to discuss the book.
5. If you are leading a group of readers in just one meeting to discuss the book, you could look at the second list of a dozen questions and select those you think will generate the most discussion.
6. The questions suggested in this guide are just that, suggestions. You should always feel free to create your own questions that may be even more appropriate for your group than the ones I suggest.

There are three sections to this Leader's Guide: 1) Two to five questions for each chapter, 2) A dozen questions from which you can choose some to guide one or two sessions, and 3) four pages of photographs depicting some of the information provided by Abuna's telling of his story in Ibillin.

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### **Questions for Each Chapter**

What follows is a series of two to four questions related to each chapter. The questions are offered as suggestions and you need to feel free to use whatever questions you think will be most appropriate for the members of your group. And, for sure, you will likely want to create your own questions.



### **Chapter 1 ... Stronger Than the Storm**

1. This chapter describes the harassment of Palestinians in Israel, with personal experiences as Abuna flies from Tel Aviv to London. Why do you suppose the airport security persons are unable to see any connections between the treatment of the Jews in Germany and the treatment of Palestinians in Israel?
2. What do you think might be going on in the minds of the two airport security persons Abuna interacted with, after he is pulled aside?
3. How would you describe the character/personality of Abuna Chacour from what you read in this chapter?

### **Chapter 2 ... We Don't Want You Here**

1. This chapter describes Abuna's first days in Ibillin as the parish priest. Have you ever ended up someplace where you were not welcomed to stay? What was the experience like?
2. Imagine being sent to a place where you were not wanted. Would you feel compelled to leave or would you figure out a reason to stay?
3. Think about the bishop's role ... what do you think he expected from the newly ordained, young priest?

### **Chapter 3 ... The Tree Must Live**

1. Does the Responsible remind you of anyone you have encountered along life's journey? If so, what were the circumstances and how did you respond?
2. Abuna was a young 25 year old recently ordained priest when he arrived in Ibillin. What or who do you think nurtured him to be so bold in his encounters with the people of Ibillin?
3. What are your impressions of Abuna's strategy of visiting all the members of his congregation as well as others in the community?

### **Chapter 4 ... Palm Sunday Prisoners**

1. What might have been the motivation for so many of the Melkite community to decide to attend the liturgy on this Palm Sunday?
2. What are some texts from the Gospels, of Jesus' teachings, that would be appropriate for reflecting on what happened in Ibillin this Palm Sunday?
3. Imagine you are a reporter and after being present for the liturgy this Palm Sunday you write an article. What is your headline for the article and what are three key points you want to share in the article?



### **Chapter 5 ... A New Jeremiah Speaks**

1. This chapter describes three encounters Abuna had with the Orthodox Priest, the Melkite Bishop, and the children. What do these three encounters tell you about the character and mission of Abuna?
2. What do you think it was that gave Abuna the courage to speak as he did to the bishop?

### **Chapter 6 ... Where is God?**

1. What thoughts do you have about Abuna's teaching strategy related to the parables of the lost and the transfiguration narratives?
2. The chapter title is "Where is God?" In what ways is the question answered in the chapter?

### **Chapter 7 ... Go Visit Every Home**

1. This chapter features bringing Sisters from Nazareth to Ibillin and responding to the needs for the Mosque, Greek Catholic Church, and the Christian cemetery. What can we learn from this chapter that could influence our church's ministry in our community?
2. What do you perceive being the factors that are making such a difference in Ibillin?

### **Chapter 8 ... We Young Priests**

1. 'We Young Priests' is from words spoken by aging Orthodox Abuna Ibrahim. Looking at the chapter as a whole, what do you see as the significance of that phrase spoken by Abuna Ibrahim?
2. What do you imagine might have been the consequences for the bishop to not read the patriarch's directives before the funerals in the Melkite and Orthodox churches?
3. What is a question you would have liked to ask Abuna Chacour the day after the funerals for Abuna Ibrahim?

### **Chapter 9 ... Escape**

1. From what did Abuna escape?
2. Why do you think he needed or wanted to escape?
3. How was his escape facilitated?
4. What do you see as the consequences of his escape?



### **Chapter 10 ... Of Cucumbers, Books, and Pigs**

1. What connections do you see between cucumbers, books, and pigs?
2. In this chapter Abuna writes a lot about the confiscation of Palestinian land and the overreach of Israeli authorities regarding the rights and livelihood of Palestinians. How do you respond to these realities?
3. It is in this chapter we first read the phrase “we belong to the land.” What does that phrase say to you about the Palestinians of whom Abuna writes?
4. What have we learned in American media about the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians?

### **Chapter 11 ... Marching in Jerusalem**

1. How do we account for a young priest from an obscure village in the Galilee region of Israel serving as the leader of a protest march in Jerusalem advocating for the rights of the citizens of Biram and Ikrit?
2. From the Israeli perspective, what might have been the repercussions if the government had allowed the citizens of Biram and Ikrit to return to their villages?
3. What are some impressions you have of the relationship between Abuna and Bishop Raya?

### **Chapter 12 ... Welcome to Beirut, Abuna**

1. What, to you, is the most memorable aspect of Abuna’s trip to Lebanon?
2. What more do we learn about Abuna’s personality?

### **Chapter 13 ... This Man is Like Ashes**

1. What are some things we learn about Abuna’s relationship with Jesus in this chapter?
2. Abuna speaks of Jesus as being his Champion, his Friend, and his Compatriot. What are some of your thoughts about these words for Jesus and what they mean to Abuna?
3. This chapter is packed with many vignettes: reminiscing about life in Biram and Jish, the bishop accepting Elias in the school in Haifa, confronting the newly appointed bishop regarding his criticism of him, returning the Responsible’s son to his family, and meeting his dear friend, Faraj. What do you see as a thread linking all the vignettes?

### **Chapter 14 ... We Are Human Beings, Not Cattle or Insects**

1. There are several scary episodes in this chapter. Which to you think is the most frightening?
2. In what ways do you see Abuna being protected, by what power?



### **Chapter 15 ... The Mount of the Ogre**

1. Up to this point in the narrative of Abuna's ministry in Ibillin, what are some things he helped to accomplish for the community and for the church?
2. Abuna imagined a secondary school on the Mount of the Ogre. What are some things you imagine for serving God's children in your context? What do you hope for to change and grow?

### **Chapter 16 ... Remember the Little Ones, My Son**

1. The words of the title of this chapter are a quote from Abuna's mother. Abuna has written often of the influence of his father and mother on his life and his calling as a priest. What are some examples you remember of how his parents nurtured and influenced him as a child, youth, and young priest?
2. In this chapter Abuna writes of several encounters: with the Queen of the Netherlands, with a committee of men committed to building a secondary school, with the Jewish authorities, and with his bishop. What do these encounters reveal about Abuna's approach to meeting with people?

### **Chapter 17 ... Get Up, Go Ahead, Do Something, Move!**

1. What do you see as Abuna's strategy for fulfilling his promise of building a secondary school?
2. From the authorities' perspective this school building project was illegal. And, from the villagers' perspective they were fearful that bad things would happen. In the midst of the conflict, what signs of hope do you discern in this chapter?
3. Abuna offers a translation of the beatitudes different from what we read in our translations of Matthew. What do you think about his alternative translation? (You will find on page 9 a litany based upon Abuna's translation/interpretation of the beatitudes. You may want to use this litany as a closing for your study of *We Belong to the Land* or in a congregational liturgy.)

### **Chapter 18 ... The Mount of Light**

1. Reread Abuna's speech to the judge toward the end of the chapter. What do you think it was in this speech that persuaded the judge to not order the school to be demolished?
2. How wise do you think it was for Abuna to be the only spokesperson for his defense and to not engage a lawyer?
3. Think about the Mount of the Ogre being transformed to the Mount of Light. What biblical passages come to mind when you consider darkness and light?



### **Chapter 19 ... For Sale, One Permit**

1. The narratives about Abuna's father meeting the Pope, the exchange of \$1,000 for a valid Israeli building permit, and the brief encounter with the young Israeli soldier are so disparate. However, what do you see being revealed about the character of Abuna?
2. Abuna provides an interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son, which perhaps should be called the parable of the loving father. What affirmations or questions do you have of Abuna's interpretation?

### **Chapter 20 ... Betrayed**

1. In this chapter there are two letters, one Abuna wrote to the bishop and his fellow priests who were at a retreat in Nazareth that he chose not to attend. How wise do you think it was for Abuna to write and send his letter?
2. The second letter was a reply from the bishop and co-signed by all the priests. Imagine yourself in Abuna's place, how would you have reacted? What feelings would you have had after reading the letter?
3. Abuna had a very emotional meeting with his dear friend, Faraj. What are some of your observations as you reflect on that meeting?

### **Chapter 21 ... Living Stones**

1. Abuna experiences five encounters in this chapter: his bishop in Haifa, hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Rome, security personnel at the airport in Tel Aviv, and Bishop Desmond Tutu and former president Jimmy Carter in Houston. What thread do you see running through his reporting of these encounters?
2. What do you see as the source of Abuna's wisdom and courage to speak the way he did in each setting?
3. Imagine yourself in Abuna's shoes in these encounters. What would you have been thinking and feeling when confronted by each challenge?
4. What experiences have you had where wisdom and courage were needed for you to respond to a challenging situation?

### **Chapter 22 ... Crucified in Gaza**

1. The story of Abuna taking a goat hostage is humorous. But Abuna turns the story into a lesson. What lesson is he teaching?
2. Abuna writes about his visit to Gaza and visiting the mother of Khader Tarazi who was killed in a vicious attack by Israeli soldiers, a killing witnessed by many. What are your thoughts and feelings about the event Abuna describes?
3. Abuna ends the chapter writing about his visit to a synagogue in Atlanta. What do you see as significant about that visit?



### **Chapter 23 ... No More Dirty Anybody!**

1. Why do you think Abuna titled this chapter, “No more dirty anybody?”
2. As you read Abuna’s description of his father acting out his experiences of 40 years earlier, what emotions were aroused in your mind and heart?

### **Chapter 24 ... Dry Bones Will Come Back to Life**

1. Imagine yourself present at the Prophet Elias High School graduation for the class of 1989. What are you thinking, feeling, or hoping for?
2. Read Ezekiel 37:1-14 about the dead bones rising to life. In what ways was that an appropriate passage upon which Abuna would base his remarks to the class of 1989 and all the gathered guests?
3. How is this event an appropriate way to conclude the book?

### **Postscript to Chapter 24**

The chapter ends in February 1990 with another postponed court appearance regarding the illegal gymnasium construction. If Abuna had waited longer to write this book he would have been able to write about finally receiving a building permit in order to complete the gymnasium. Abuna had been introduced to the former Secretary of State for Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. They became friends and Abuna became a prayer partner with Susan Baker. It is a wonderful story when told by Abuna about the influence of James Baker on the securing of the building permit.



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## A Dozen Questions Reflecting on the Whole Book

1. What are your impressions of *We Belong to the Land*? What are some things you learned? What are some questions you have?
2. What have you learned about the character of Abuna Elias Chacour and his ministry as a Melkite Catholic priest?
3. Abuna Chacour employed many strategies for ministering to the people of Ibillin and beyond. What are some examples that stand out for you that showed his wisdom, courage, and tenacity for ministering to his people in the name of Jesus?
4. In reading the whole book, what do we learn about Abuna's relationship with Jesus?
5. Abuna speaks of Jesus as being his Champion, his Friend, and his Compatriot. What are some of your thoughts about these words for Jesus and what they mean to Abuna? What words might you use to express your relationship to Jesus?
6. At the end of chapter 17 Abuna offers an alternative translation and interpretation of the beatitudes in Matthew. What do you think of that translation and interpretation? How does the meaning of the beatitudes shift with that translation?
7. Abuna writes about the importance his parents played in nurturing his spirituality, his understanding of Jesus, and his way of speaking and relating to people. Where in his story do you see examples of his parents' influence?
8. Throughout this story of his ministry as a priest in Ibillin there are occasions when Abuna is experiencing conflict with his parishioners in Ibillin, his religious superiors and colleagues, and the Israeli authorities. What have you learned about Abuna's way of dealing with such conflicts? And what have you learned that may influence your approach to conflicts you experience?
9. Abuna had great compassion for the Palestinian children and a vision of how providing them with quality education would make such a difference in their lives. After reading the whole story, what do you see as significant examples of his compassion being expressed and his vision realized?
10. Abuna is writing about events that happened 30 to 60+ years ago. Based on what you read and see in the news regarding events in Israel/Palestine, what do you see as similar or different from what Abuna writes about?
11. After reading *We Belong to the Land* what are some insights you gained that could help you in your faith and life journey as a Christian?
12. If you were to recommend to a friend that they should read the book, what would you say about the book that might encourage them to read it?





## **Straighten Up, You Faithful of God °**

(Based on Matthew 5:1-12)

God calls you to get up and move, you who are poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

***I desire to be with you, God, you are my strength and my life.***

Straighten up, you people who grieve, for you will be comforted.

***I seek your comfort and love in my time of sorrow and despair.***

Lift up your head, you who are humble, for you will inherit the earth.

***O God, help me to know my place of worth in your realm.***

Set yourself in a new direction, you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be filled.

***You grant me more than I deserve and I am deeply grateful, gracious God.***

When you do acts of mercy, you will receive mercy.

***Remind me, O God, that I am to show compassion for the other, as you do.***

When you act as persons whose hearts are pure, you shall see God.

***I am unworthy and yet you receive me into your presence.***

Commit yourself to be a peacemaker, not a peace contemplator, then you will be called children of God.

***To be your child is to work for peace among ALL your children.***

You are to act with courage and integrity in response to those who insult you, mistreat you, and tell evil lies about you because of your faith in Jesus Christ.

***Be with me, my God, as I seek to be a faithful witness to your peace, your love, and your justice. AMEN***

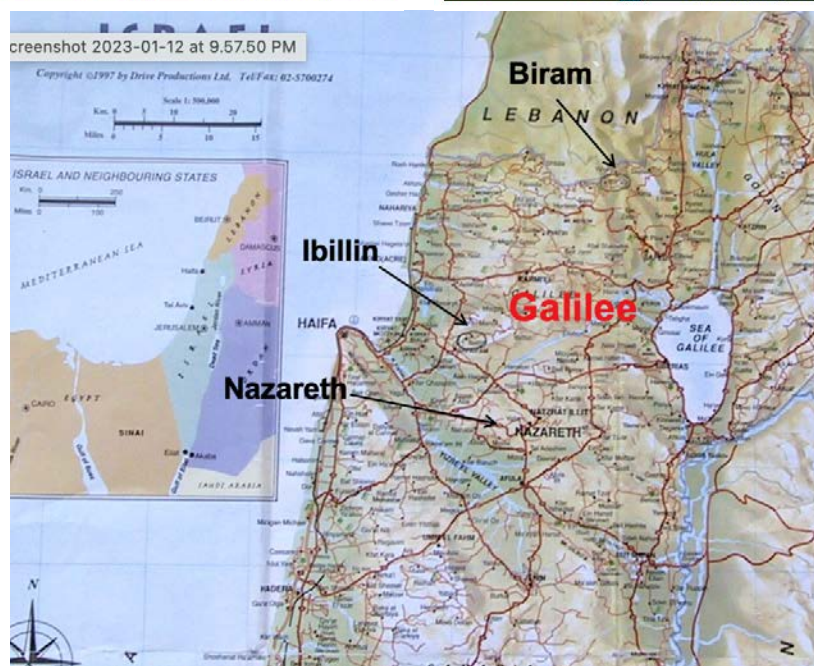
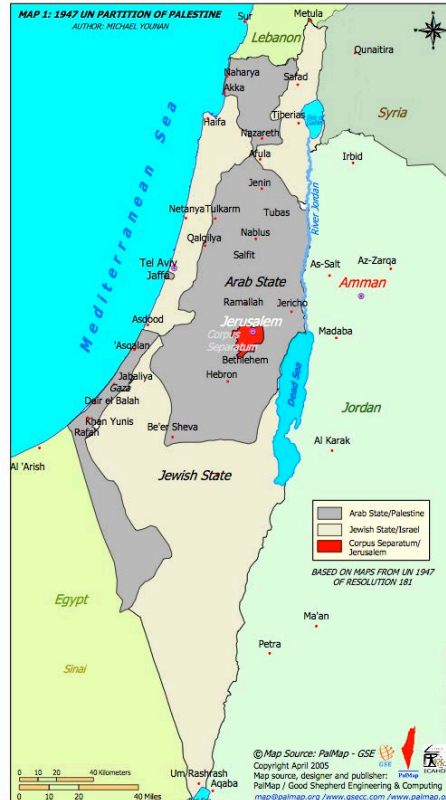
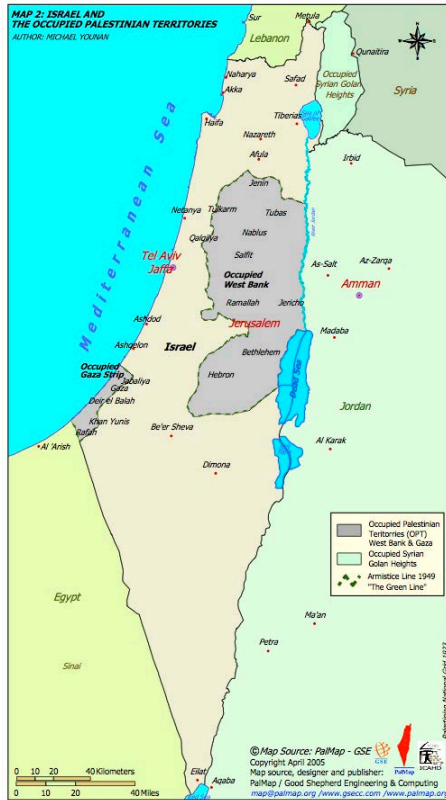
° A litany prepared by Donald L. Griggs based upon Father Elias Chacour's Interpretation of the beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.



# Pilgrims of Ibillin

## Three Maps and Fifteen Photos

The photos are from the Prophet Elias High School archives, from Abuna's personal photo album and from photos taken by Donald L. Griggs during his visits to Ibillin.



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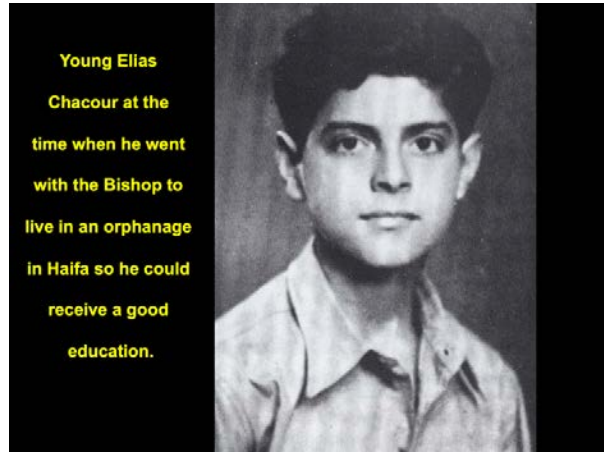
Biram before 1948



Ruins of Abuna's family home in Biram



The restored church in Biram



Faraj, Bishop Hakim, Elias Chacour, and his parents



Faraj, Bishop Hakim and Elias Chacour

# Pilgrims of Ibillin



The Volkswagen ... how did he sleep in it?



The interior of the Melkite Church in Ibillin



Beginning construction of the high school



The completed high school



The high school on the left and the peace center and guest house on the right



High school students gathered before classes begin to hear Abuna speak to them

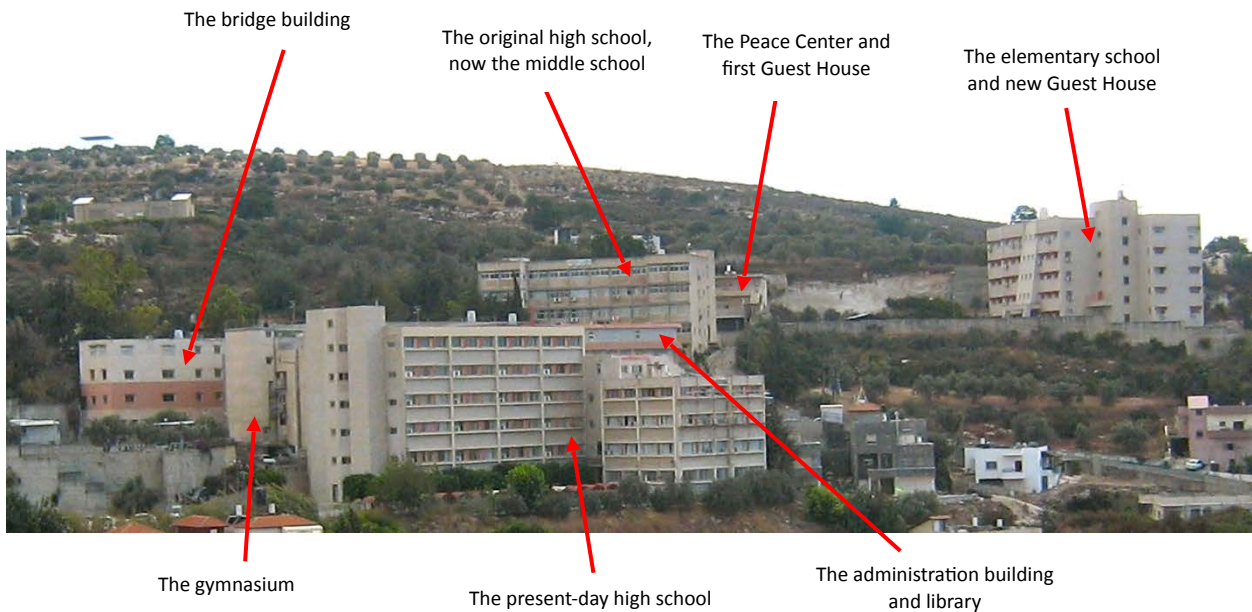


Construction halted on the gymnasium



The gymnasium today

## The Mar Elias Educational Institutions Campus Today



## About the author

The Rev. Dr. Donald L. Griggs is a retired pastor/educator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) living in Livermore, CA. He served as the first executive director of Pilgrims of Ibillin from 2001–07 and made 13 trips to Israel/Palestine.



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## About Pilgrims of Ibillin

Focusing on education and projects that train and empower peace-builders, we support programs and institutions where young people are given outstanding opportunities to study and grow as well-rounded leaders, grounded in a commitment to peacemaking and reconciliation.

We have worked primarily but not exclusively with Mar Elias Educational Institutions (MEEI) in the village of Ibillin, in the Galilee region of northern Israel. MEEI's founder, Father Elias Chacour, articulated a goal that perfectly embodies the mission of Pilgrims: *"We intend to build peace on the desktops of children."*

Since 2008 we have also developed "Peace-building Partnerships" with schools and organizations in the West Bank, Gaza, and elsewhere in Israel to support additional projects working for a just peace for all in Palestine and Israel. Our pilgrimages include visits to most of our partner organizations.

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## To Financially Support Mar Elias Education Institutions and Pilgrims of Ibillin

- Donate online at - <https://bit.ly/donatepilgrims>
- Mail a check to - Pilgrims of Ibillin, % Davidson College Presbyterian Church, P.O. Box 337, 100 North Main Street, Davidson, NC 28036

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- Visit our website at <https://pilgrimsofibilin.org/>
- Email our Executive Director Essrea Cherin at [essrea@pilgrimsofibilin.org](mailto:essrea@pilgrimsofibilin.org)
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