

## The message inside the message

*As told to Philip Hunt, by Rev Dr Robert Hunt, of the English Speaking United Methodist Church of Vienna.*

My pastor, Robert Hunt, was in Bethlehem last week. He saw the Pope. Although the Pope almost certainly didn't see him.

Robert was in Manger Square, on the top of the hill in Bethlehem, to participate in the celebration of Mass with the Pope. And a few thousand others. He witnessed something very beautiful. An inter-faith moment of tolerance and peace. A moment that was either missed, or misinterpreted, by most foreigners present. Including the foreign media.

As the Pope finished his address there was silence for a moment. Then the moment was shattered by the shrill call to prayer from the loudspeakers on a nearby Muslim mosque. Within seconds, the call was echoed from the many other mosques that are liberally sprinkled around Bethlehem. For some long minutes the call to the Noon-time Muslim prayers rang out. And the people in the Christian service in Manger Square waited in silence.

Then, the call completed, the Christian service resumed with these words in Arabic, "Now that our Muslim brothers have confessed their faith in the One God, let us confess our faith in Jesus Christ." And the service continued.

Foreign reporters covering the service commented that there was palpable tension in Manger Square over the interruption. They portrayed it as an example of the divide between the communities. One more insult by the Muslims aimed at the Christians. But they reported wrongly.

They should have looked at their watches. All the mosques waited until the Pope had finished. Their call to prayer was deliberately delayed. Out of respect for their Christian brothers and sisters. One needed to understand how serious and essential is a strict observance of the Muslim prayer regime. And how remarkable and generous would be a decision to vary the timing of this regime.

They should have asked for the Christian response to have been translated from Arabic. It was a statement of inclusive tolerance. An affirmation of fraternity and peace.

A peaceful and secure future for Israel and Palestine will only be found among those who remain committed to love, peace and tolerance.