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Bethlehem L'Arche workshop makes Christmas sheep

by Catholic News Service

Bethlehem, West Bank — style="margin-left: 1in;">The Ma'an lil-Hayat workshop is in full swing as adults shape felted wool into round balls for a large order of sheep to fill people's Nativity scenes.

Ma'an lil-Hayat -- Arabic for "Together for Life" -- is part of the international L'Arche network founded in 1964 by Canadian Catholic Jean Vanier for people with intellectual disabilities. The workshop takes a local resource closely associated with the Christmas story -- sheep wool -- and uses it to bring dignity and recognition to a population often overlooked in Palestinian society.

Mahera Nassar Ghareeb, director and founder of Ma'an lil-Hayat, said that at Christmastime most of the project's stock flies off the shelves, either at their workshop store, at other Bethlehem and Jerusalem gift shops or via Internet sales (www.maanlilhayat.ps). In addition to Nativity scenes, workers produce wool felted coin purses, gnomes, Christmas ornaments and caterpillars.

"There is a real need in Palestine for more places for disabled people; there are not enough places, especially for adults," she said. "There are schools and day care centers for disabled children, but when they grow up they are usually on the streets or locked at home."

Once the connection was made with L'Arche, the founders searched for a project that would be suitable for the "core members" -- a reference to disabled members of the workshops -- as well as something that would bring in some income to the organization. A French volunteer suggested wool felting as an option, and the workshop opened its doors in June 2009.

"In Palestine, we had never done that -- there was knitting and weaving, but we had never heard of felting," said Ghareeb.

Because program officials want the work done by the core members, and not by the four associates working with them, the capacity to produce quickly in mass numbers remains low, Ghareeb said.

"We work the whole year to sell for the last three months of the year," she said. Their profits cover only half of their expenses, she added, so organizational grants and private donations must supplement their budget.

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