

ROBIN ARNOTT

SOME THOUGHTS ON MY TIME WITH EMMS

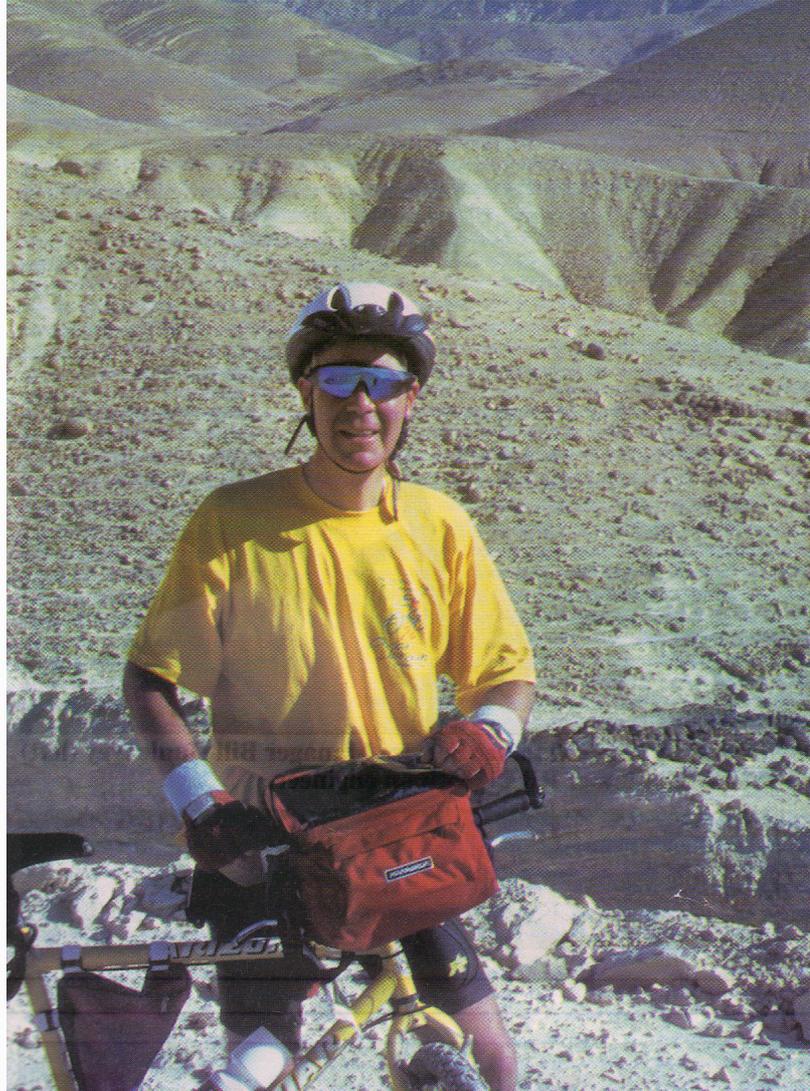
How did you hear about EMMS and the Nazareth Hospital?

In 1985, I was the editor of Dalgety Parish Church's magazine "The Bell". That year, "Life and Work", the magazine of the Church of Scotland, ran a competition to discover the best parish magazine in Scotland, and "The Bell" emerged as the overall winner. The prize was a two-week visit to the Holy Land in May 1986, under the leadership of Rev Dr James Martin, minister at High Carntyne Church. He was a great supporter of the Nazareth Hospital and insisted that we (my wife was part of the group) visit. As a result of that visit, I persuaded our church, as part of its 1986 Harvest appeal, to raise funds to provide a baby incubator for the Hospital.

My next contact was as a participant in the 1993 Bike Ride, which departed from the Nazareth Hospital. In 1996, I took part in another bike ride. Following this, the Board of the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society (EMMS) decided that as I had been very supportive of the Hospital, I should be invited to become an Associate Director of the Board, and I was appointed in December 1996.

What was EMMS working on back then?

The focus was very much on the Nazareth Hospital. However, a realisation was beginning to dawn on the Board that managing a Hospital 3,500 miles away with an annual



Robin Arnott at EMMS Bike Ride (1996)

turnover of £10m as part of an unincorporated organisation was perhaps not the best model. In 1996, the Hospital was still being run very much on "missionary lines", heavily dependent on ex-pat doctors and nurses. It lacked full integration into the Israeli healthcare system and did not have any technology services. At that time, I worked for the Royal Bank of Scotland as a Senior Manager, heading up the Computer

Operations department. But I knew I would retire early by April the following year.

What plans did you have post-retirement?

In discussion with the EMMS Board, it was agreed that, after retiring, I would project manage the installation of an integrated computer and PABX system into the Hospital. For the next year or so, I spent considerable time in Nazareth, latterly living in a small flat at the rear of the original doctor's house. I had to do my own cooking, but I became adept at shopping at the stalls at the bottom of the hill where the Hospital stood. Even now, I miss the taste of fresh vegetables and spices.

During that period, I came to know the Hospital well and understand how it worked and some of its internal and external problems. I got to know some of the people working at the Hospital, and I also had the opportunity to explore Nazareth on foot during my free time and came to know the town quite well.

Can you tell us a bit more about the computer system project?

The funding for the project (around \$600,000) came from USAID (United States Agency for International Development), through Nazareth Project Inc., based in the States, a scheme not without its problems. Resolving issues by email proved impossible, so the Finance Director of the Hospital and I flew to Washington DC to meet the funders and ensure the problems were fixed

and funding was guaranteed. Our visit was successful, and the computer system (to everybody's relief) was subsequently delivered on time and within budget.

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"Even now, I miss the taste of fresh vegetables and spices"

How did you become the CEO at EMMS?

By the summer of 1998, Fred Aitken, the then Executive Secretary of EMMS, announced his intention to retire. By this time, the Board had embarked on a project to develop the Nazareth Village. I had also concluded that the future of EMMS lay in widening its horizons beyond the Nazareth Hospital. I applied for Fred Aitken's job and was appointed Chief Executive in September 1998. I had two prime roles – one was to create new legal entities for the Nazareth Hospital and for (what was left of) EMMS. The other was to establish and develop the “new” EMMS.

Once we realised that separating the Nazareth Hospital from EMMS left nothing more than a shell, the Board agreed to broaden the base of mission activity for EMMS, which helped lay the groundwork for the new limited



company. **Dr Donald McIntyre**, an EMMS director, and I would visit potential projects in India and Nepal. In December 1998, the TB (Tuberculosis) and Leprosy clinic in Surkhet, **Nepal**, was managed by the International Nepal Fellowship (INF); we also visited the Sahyog Project of the Emmanuel Hospital Association (EHA) in **New Delhi**, and **Dr Stephen Alfred's Dolkan Project** near **Mumbai** to select one for EMMS support. We thought that all three projects were worthy, and the Board adopted them all as official EMMS International projects.

What about the Nazareth Hospital?

The Hospital, however, also had to be placed on a firm footing. Therefore, a Board of Directors was set up to govern the Hospital. Along with **Dr David Harrison**, Chair of EMMS International, and one or two others, I was appointed as the director of EMMS Nazareth. This was around the same time a director of the Nazareth Village was selected, which, by then, had become an autonomous organisation. I worked closely with **Mike Hostetler**, the Village's Project Manager, in writing plans and policy documents and outlining governance procedures for the development of the Village and was fortunate to play a part in the embryonic project.

After my extended spells in Nazareth during the computer project, my visits to Nazareth reduced to, on average, every two months. In 1999, the then Medical Director of the Hospital, **Dr Bob Martin** (from the USA), was due to retire. **Dr Nakhle Bishara** had been appointed as the new Medical Director, and an



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interview panel was set up at the Hospital to recruit for the new post of Chief Executive Officer. **Mr Derek Thomson**, an experienced NHS Hospital manager and administrator, was appointed as CEO, based in Nazareth, with a brief to modernise the Hospital and the associated School of Nursing without losing sight of its Christian focus. The Hospital, back then, still belonged to the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society and, technically, came under my responsibility. However, in practice, Derek Thomson assumed Executive control.

What were your main tasks as CEO at EMMS?

As Chief Executive of EMMS, I had no formal role with the Hospital.





Nazareth Academic School of Nursing students (2002)

Although apart from my directorship, I had to work closely with Derek Thomson. This ensured that the change-over from an unincorporated organisation to a limited company went smoothly. Separating EMMS into two constituent parts, a process led by our offices in Edinburgh, occupied much of my time for the next three years. It turned out to be a lengthy and complicated process. It involved meeting the constraints of both Scottish and Israeli charity regulators and observing company law and associated legislation in different legal and regulatory environments. EMMS Nazareth and EMMS International were registered in 2001. They became fully operational over

the next two years, as legal and charitable aspects were addressed and new working relationships were established.

I spent my time at EMMS International developing the projects we had established with INF, EHA, and **Dr Stephen Alfred**. We also started projects in Malawi, working with Ekwendeni and Embangweni Hospitals in the north of the country and, in the south, with Mulanje Mission Hospital and **Dr Jane Bates** in Blantyre. In addition, we revised our governance policies, expanded our support base, upgraded our magazine, created a website, and quadrupled our income over the next few years. It was a busy time until I

retired from EMMS International in 2007.

What motivated you to join EMMS?

What motivated me to support EMMS is a complex question. I like to think I have always been community-minded and able to apply Christian principles through word and deed. It is one of the main aspects of the 1970s that had drawn me towards studying to become a Reader of the Church of Scotland. The visit to the Nazareth Hospital amplified that approach of **Christian witness** accompanied by good deeds – a hospital willing to serve people of every race and creed without fear or favour. I was impressed by the approach and dedication of the staff, a range of ex-pats from the UK, USA, and Europe working alongside Palestinians and Jews, Christians and Muslims in a completely harmonious relationship. To my mind, this was an approach I could relate to and was willing to support.

There is a complexity to running a Christian Hospital in the Middle East. During my first visit, the ratio of Christians to Muslims in Nazareth was around 70% to 30%. Then by the time I had retired, the ratio had reversed. The Christian presence is a direct link to the events of 2,000 years ago, a reminder to people of the sacrifice Jesus made for humankind. With the Christian faith under pressure in the Middle East, support for the Hospital as a **beacon of Christian presence and light** needs to be maintained.

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"A hospital willing to serve people of every race and creed without fear or favour"



Nazareth Hospital Executive Team (2001). From left to right, Randa Elias (Director of Nursing), Elia Abdo (Finance Director), George Abdo (Hospital Administrator), Derek Thomson (CEO) and Dr Nahkle Bishara (Medical Director)





Mural in the Hospital canteen (2002)

What did you enjoy the most about your time at EMMS Nazareth?

One could ask the philosophical question, "What is enjoyment?". My time in Nazareth was as a volunteer worker. Still, I enjoyed the atmosphere at the Hospital and the friendships that developed. Latterly, it was enjoyable to see a computerised system running in the Hospital and the benefits it brought to the staff and, ultimately, patients.

Enjoyment came through getting to know the staff at the Hospital, receiving invitations to homes to share in family meals, weddings, outings with Hospital staff to villages in the surrounding area, and trips to Akko to sample the seafood at the waterfront restaurants. Doctors taking you to visit vineyards with

wine-tasting sessions. Meeting young volunteers who came to work at the Hospital from countries worldwide was also an enjoyable and mind-broadening experience.

Enjoyment came through being able to wander the streets of Nazareth, getting to know the town and meeting local people - many were supporters of the Hospital. I met people who were **the backbone of Nazareth**: politicians and bankers, the shopkeepers where food and provisions were bought. The taste of the Middle East, including freshly-squeezed olive oil and award-winning wine, could be brought home in hand luggage in those days (pre-terror threats). The enjoyment lasted on over the dinner table at home.



Derek Thomson, and his wife Isabel, were new to the Hospital and the Middle East, but it turned out that, in addition to our faith, we shared several interests – a love of classical music, food, and good wine. Occasionally, we spent an evening together or lingered over lunch after church on a Sunday. It was a friendship that has endured beyond our time at the Hospital.

How did your time in Nazareth impact your faith?

Having visited the Hospital in 1986 and on bike rides, I was half-prepared for what I might find when I went to work there. As well as supporting the Hospital, EMMS, in the late 1990s-early 2000s, had a vision that extending its work into Gaza would be a good opportunity, and a visit was paid to Al Ahli Arab Hospital, Gaza City. On the day of the visit (28 September 2000), an incident happened in Jerusalem when Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount. This visit was regarded as a provocation, and the Second Intifada started that same day, just as I was set to cross the border back into Israel. I remember the heightened tension at the border but did not realise the severity of the provocation until I watched the late evening news on the television.

The Intifada profoundly affected how I viewed Israeli/Arab relations and certainly called into question the basis of faith and 'love your neighbour'. This was such a far cry from the Nazareth Hospital, where men and women of different religions worked together for the benefit of humanity. The Biblical



Nazareth Hospital chapel

message was clear to all who wanted to see it. It taught me that, deep down, people of different races and nationalities are very much the same, with the same goals and ideals. Prejudice is the product of narrow-mindedness and a refusal to understand the needs of others or a refusal to understand that others had legitimate, justifiable needs.

God works in mysterious ways, and faith develops and matures over time, partly, I believe, through reading and study and partly through service in His name. Seeing the dedication of staff and volunteers left an indelible mark and

strengthened my belief that God's work was best carried out through service and the need to care for your neighbour. That concept was further applied when I went to work full-time for EMMS and was expressed through the projects we ran in India, Nepal, and Malawi.

Is there anyone you met in Nazareth who particularly inspired you?

It would be difficult not to mention **Dr Hans Bernath** and his wife, **Madeleine**. By the time I went to work at the Hospital, he had long retired as the Medical Director. Still, he continued to involve himself enthusiastically in the Hospital upgrades and building projects. He and his wife had been a fixture at the Hospital since the 1950s. They had seen it grow from a post-war, basic mission Hospital to a multi-million-pound operation based on new buildings that he had helped design.

Hans and Madeleine ran an "open house" at lunchtime for the volunteer workers. Everyone sitting under the shade of their vine, drinking coffee, and listening to Hans recounting tales of taking clinics to Bedouin homes, providing maternity services at the Hospital, and providing medical services near the villages where Palestinians and Israelis clashed. It was a history lesson in itself. One could not help but admire Hans and Madeleine's courage and selflessness, both of whom had given over their lives in service to God. It was a joy to have met and known them.

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"Seeing the dedication of staff and volunteers left an indelible mark"



Do you want to get involved in the Nazareth Challenge like Robin did many years ago? This October's bike ride is full, but there are still spaces to join the Jesus Trail. Get in touch for more information:

**Email: events@nazarethtrust.org
 Tel: 0131 225 9957**