

“Merry” Business of Humanity®

This past December, I was teaching at our partner’s campus in the West Bank and had the opportunity to visit Bethlehem just before Christmas. My thought was how perfect... I would buy all of my Christmas gift recipients a Christmas ornament from the place where it all started. I happened upon a craft fair selling various handmade wares and one table had just what I was looking for. I didn’t want “Made in China” ornaments that were sold to me in Bethlehem and I found the real deal. I was told by the merchant, “Genuine wool from Bethlehem area sheep formed into ornaments by hand right in the city.” However, that was only a small part of the story.

The ornaments were indeed made by local people using local materials. In fact, they were made by an organization called Al-Malath. After further investigation, I discovered that that Al-Malath is an organization that works with mentally disabled Palestinian children and provides educational services and programs to help those in need learn, develop skills, and become productive members of Palestinian society. The bulk of their funding comes from the sale of their Christmas ornaments and other handmade goods designed for the visitors to Bethlehem.

I filled my backpack with ornaments and the merchant only wanted about the equivalent of \$60 in Shekels. After talking with her about the programs that the sale supports, I asked her if it would be all right if I gave her \$100 in American money instead. She gave me the biggest smile that I had seen all trip as I handed her the money. Walking away from the craft fair, I started thinking about how they were going to use the money from my small purchase... a purchase that I thought was an absolutely wonderful gift... a Christmas present wrapped in a Christmas worthy story.

There are microbusinesses like this all over the world. Some, like Goodwill Industries, exist right in our back yard here in Pittsburgh. Rather than asking for a donation, organizations will make a product or deliver a service that is valued by the marketplace. They use the production as a training tool to impart skills. Is this not a perfect example of the Business of Humanity® in action? Please watch for future posts on Al-Malath. I have been considering how I can work with Al-Malath to get their products on the market here in the United States.

**Dr. John Lipinski is an Associate Professor in the Department of Management, Eberly College of Business and Information, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.*