In the year 46CE a famine descended upon Jerusalem. When St. Paul learned of this he decided to raise funds among the churches he had established in Galatia and Greece to bring relief to the ‘saints’ in Jerusalem. Christianity was in its infancy, and significant debate was under way about how Jewish a believer had to be to be a follower of Jesus. St. James, leader of the church in Jerusalem and St. Paul, apostle to the Gentiles (as he came to be known) struggled with how to resolve this tension. Paul’s letters and the Book of Acts are full of the details of this identity crisis.

And then there’s the famine . . . Despite the issues surrounding whether or not baptism was enough to demonstrate one’s faith in Christ, there were the real and ongoing needs of the saints in Jerusalem. St. Paul knew of the need of his sisters and brothers in Christ in the Holy City and wrote (and no doubt preached) extensively to encourage others to be generous from their own pockets to provide for the needs of others – in this case, the ‘saints’ in Jerusalem.

St. Paul recognized the spiritual benefit of the connection between his gentle followers of Jesus, spread at that time throughout modern Turkey and Greece, with the faithful in the land where Jesus was born, lived, died and rose again. St. Paul would never use a term like ‘solidarity’ to describe the importance of this relationship with the believers in Jerusalem, but that is what he sought. He sought a sense of solidarity, a unity of spirit beyond the categories of ‘Jew’ or ‘gentile’ – indeed being neither male nor female, but one in Christ Jesus.

The Good Friday Offering carries on a similar witness as a tangible connection between Christians in the Episcopal Church and the saints, Christians throughout the Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East who welcome our prayers, advocacy and financial support in keeping the faith alive through their ministries of education, health care, pastoral care and hospitality throughout the Land of the Holy One.

“Sheltered Workshop” program at Princess Basma Center, Jerusalem. Photo credit: Lynette Wilson