

Jordan's king donates land for church at baptismal river site: Anglicans to build at Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan

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King Abdullah II of Jordan has given a plot of land to the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem for construction of a church and retreat center at the much-visited Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan site, where, according to tradition, Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist took place.

In officially dedicating the two-and-a-half-acre site on March 28, Anglican bishop Suheil Dawani of Jerusalem called the gift a "privilege" that will enable the building "of a medium-sized Gothic church," according to Episcopal News Service.

"It will be a center for the entire Anglican Communion all over the world to visit and connect with what's going on here," Dawani said. King Abdullah II, in a statement, cited Jordan as an example of tolerance and coexistence between Islam and Christianity.

In addition to about 550 clergy and laity from Jordan churches, the gathering included Prince Ghazi bin Mohammed, the king's adviser on churches in Jordan. The prince was a key figure in arranging for an unprecedented letter last year from Muslim leaders and scholars inviting Christian church leaders to dialog on the two faiths' mutual adherence to the love of God and love of neighbor.

The projected construction at the baptismal site "becomes an important part of Jordan's invitation to the Christian religious community to participate in collegiality and interfaith dialogue," Prince Ghazi said.

In 2007, according to Jordanian statistics, about 400,000 people visited the Bethany site, said Nichola Akei, assistant to Dawani. The diocese has 31 congregations in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel, as well as hospitals, clinics, schools and other institutions.