

The Bethlehem Alliance: Overview, History, Plans and Status

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The Bethlehem Alliance, an informal international alliance, was established to help Palestinians connect both globally and locally through high-quality Internet video (IP-video), with benefits to the public in education, healthcare, the arts and government service. (IP-video refers here not to the familiar low-quality Internet video commonly seen today, but to commercial-grade video now being developed for the next-generation Internet, or Internet2.)

Healthcare professionals and educators have long recognized the potential for IP-video to reach underserved, geographically remote, regions. It offers both one-way broadcasting and two-way videoconferencing, with higher quality than normal television and low operating costs, and because IP-video relies on the Internet, it has nearly global reach and no per-minute charges.

Until recently, technical complexity and equipment costs had limited the application of IP-video, but with increasing demand, manufacturers have begun producing inexpensive and reliable components, enabling more widespread use. For example, via their existing Internet service, small rural healthcare facilities can now use IP-video for remote specialist consults and schools in sparsely populated areas routinely offer classes in subjects for which there are no local teachers. IP-video quality is now high enough that we are even starting to see remote psychiatric sessions. These examples are not meant to suggest that remotely provided services are better than those delivered in person, but simply that service delivery is now both possible and practical where in-person services are not available.

Although increasingly practical, IP-video does still demand certain expertise and specialized devices, as well as Internet service with distinctive characteristics. The Bethlehem Alliance addresses those needs by lending skills and technology to public benefit institutions in the West Bank and Gaza, in support of establishing stable IP-video communication in a region where travel is unpredictable.

Development work on the Bethlehem Alliance began in earnest during an October, 2004 visit. I conducted demonstrations and briefed senior officials, technical support staff, faculty and physicians at universities, hospitals, major NGO's and the National Conservatory of Music. All were unequivocally enthusiastic about proceeding.

During that trip we achieved a small but historic success: the first known inter-institutional Internet videoconference using the Palestinian public Internet. Then in December, with support from colleagues elsewhere, we achieved a larger success: the first connection from Palestine to the world's largest next-generation Internet videoconference, The Megaconference.

I will return to the West Bank on February 26, 2005, for three weeks, to 1) continue identifying potential participants, as well as sites for live demonstrations, 2) promote formation of local working groups to advance the project in my absence, 3) build further relationships with government officials, commercial Internet providers and other interested agencies, and 4) bring additional equipment for the group's continuing work.

This work will be supported by the Western New York High Performance Networked Video Initiative (WNY-HPNVI), a regional public service project I've been directing at the University at Buffalo for eight years and for which I was honored with a SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence. The Bethlehem Alliance is a natural extension of the WNY-HPNVI, as the two share nearly identical objectives and methods, and a common WNY constituency. As with the WNY-HPNVI in its early years, private donations are covering this project's initial expenses and I am donating my time, until formal institutional support can be secured. Representatives of WNY schools, colleges, hospitals, and religious institutions have formed a local advisory group, and the prospects for grants and institutional support appear to be excellent.

Optional photo and caption content for published versions:



Photo 1

Whitlock at the International Center of Bethlehem, November 2004, after a good morning briefing officials at the US Consulate General, Jerusalem. The cracked stone is the one he refers to when he speaks of the [Bethlehem Alliance](#) and similar efforts metaphorically as contributions to Healing the Stone. We may suspect that the wounds of the world will not change much in our lifetimes, but the work must go on and we all have faith, as that the sun will rise, that our efforts will prevail in time. His trademark "Bitsy's Dad" hat goes with him everywhere. Bitsy, his daughter, inspires his efforts when his own faith and energy sag.

Whitlock has been supporting, promoting and developing public benefit applications of IP-video for almost a decade in Western New York at the University at Buffalo where he directs a public service project to that end. His work was recognized with a SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in 2001. The Bethlehem Alliance is a direct extension of that continuing effort to include underserved global regions.