

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

What hope equals in The Holy Land conflict

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A team of six Michigan students and I recently returned after five weeks in Israel and Palestine. We were there throughout Operation Brother's Keeper, and we saw that turn into Operation Protective Edge. We went with a project of Christian Reformed World Missions called Hope Equals. Its purpose is to ally with Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers — a task that gets harder every time we go.

The most common question I get about the program, and about our trip, is whether we are pro-Israel or pro-Palestine. To answer, I have to brush aside



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the oversimplification of the situation and start from scratch. Hope Equals works with Israelis and Palestinians; when we go, we meet with both. In a sense, Hope Equals is "pro" both but not "anti" either. How? Three statements sum up our approach.

We are pro-people: We saw Hamas' rockets explode above our heads and shuddered. We also ran as Israel fired steel bullets with a coat of rubber. Being pro-people meant we sought out those who defend the dignity of their neighbors and respected

the humanity of their enemies. This comes from our Christian conviction that we are mandated to love every person, because everyone is created in God's image, regardless of race, beliefs, gender or personal history.

We foster hope: When we were in Bethlehem, we stayed with Palestinian host families. Our hosts were terrified. None of us knew which house would get raided, but we offered solidarity in a time of need and prayed together. Reformed theology sees hope in God redeeming the world despite evil. Despite our lack of control over violence, we sat through the dark hours of the night, with soldiers all around, hoping they would pass by, hop-

ing the violence would end.

We strive for peace: Hope Equals takes the beatitude of "blessed are the peacemakers" as a command. The term "shalom" in Hebrew refers to right relationship, not just the absence of violence.

In Jerusalem, we stood with a nonviolent Israeli group called Women in Black. Most days, the demonstration turns into debates. This year, as we stood there, we were spat on by drivers and pedestrians, cursed at in five languages. Striving for peace means challenging evil. Those who dare to strive for peace often suffer consequences.

We stand with Jews, Christians and Muslims. But

we say "strive" because right relationship is a daily struggle, a habit, a practice and a lifestyle of shalom. We learn how Israelis and Palestinians practice shalom in the Holy Land. We practice it by reaching out to Americans willing to ally with brave Israelis and Palestinians who have committed their lives to non-violence and reconciliation. In the Christian Bible, Jesus calls peacemakers blessed, for they will be called children of God.

Mariano Israel Avila oversees the Christian Reformed World Missions' organization Hope Equals, which promotes justice, peace and reconciliation in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.