

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Interfaith clergy find words of hope in Israel



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"It's complicated."

That is how one of the Grand Rapids clergy members traveling with his interfaith companions in Israel describes the many conversations he had during his just-concluded time there.

The Rev. Bob Linstrom, from Trinity Lutheran Church, writes: "That two-word summary has closed many of the conversations we have had with our guide, Uri, a former Israeli paratrooper, as well as with various hosts and speakers in our travels through Israel."

Standing together with his Jewish and Muslim colleagues at an overlook of the barrier that runs through Jerusalem, he describes the "combined fence and wall that cuts through neighborhoods and segregates the city. Rabbi Israel 'Izzy' Zoberman, the son of Polish concentration camp survivors and one of our traveling companions, would shake his head when political conversations seemed to arrive at an impasse, with the summation, 'It's complicated.'"

But Linstrom goes on to describe a counter-narrative, "one that evokes a hope-filled, intentional future of common people seeking to actualize the dream of peace." He recounts a supper following worship in a Jerusalem synagogue, where a 10-year-old girl and her grandmother shared with him their belief "that the people of Israel, Jew and Muslim, Christian, Druze and others,

would share a future together that would be one of peace."

Travelling together with Linstrom is Dr. Sharif Sahibzada, imam and director of the Islamic Center and Mosque of Grand Rapids. The Rev. Chandler Stokes, pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church, is also a part of this interfaith clergy experience in Israel that was initiated by Rabbi Michael Schadick of Temple Emanuel. All four are a part of the Congregations Partnership Program, which brings clergy and congregations together to learn, support, and develop friendships.

It is one component of the "2018 — Year of Interfaith Friendship" underway in West Michigan. The clergy will share their reflections following the showing of the National Geographic film, "Jerusalem," on Monday. Further information can be found at interfaithunderstanding.org

Stokes describes their visit to what the Muslims call the Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) and the Jews call the Temple Mount (site of the ancient First and Second Temples). It features the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

"When we entered the great plaza, our friend, Imam Sahibzada, entered the mosque to pray while we walked around outside and took in more of the history and reflected for ourselves on the meaning of this place. From there, we went around outside to the Western Wall, where we were invited to pray. I was accompanied by one of the rabbis in our group to stand, touch, and pray at the 2,000-year-old supporting wall which was underneath the Second Temple."

On another day, Stokes describes his experience in Galilee of seeing a small fishing vessel from the first century that was discovered in the mud along the shore of the lake. Carefully reconstructed and on display in a museum, it is "clear evidence of the very years of Jesus' life in Galilee," the pastor writes. "And, as guide Uri says, 'Sometimes here, you don't need to close your eyes to imagine the past, but you can open your eyes to see it.'"

He also felt the past become present in another experience: "One enduring image from Capernaum was the short distance between the synagogue and what was claimed as Peter's house, already a pilgrimage site in the second century. Mark 1, which references both sites, is newly alive for me. I went down to the water there and touched the Sea of Galilee. There were the sounds of birds. People talking and making the noise of work. It's a real life now. It was a real life then.

"Don't miss your real life. It is all around you, and it is infused with holiness."

For Linstrom, the most poignant conversation was with a man named Amin, a guide from an Arab village who hosted the group with a lavish luncheon with food from his garden. Amin told of his oldest son, Hassan, being the only Palestinian student in Harduf Waldorf School, a private academy of Jewish children. Hassan found "genuine community with his classmates," who often invited him to play in their homes and played at his, as well.

A third-grade curriculum exercise of

self-discovery led Hassan to ask his father if he could go on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. When they returned, Linstrom writes, Hassan's classmates "threw him a party and crowned him a Muslim prince. In his growing up among classmates of a different faith, Hassan had come to know the depth of his own faith tradition, while being both accepted and celebrated" by them.

"In that faraway Galilean valley, not far from the town of Nazareth where Jesus grew up, experiences like Hassan's have led the families to form a shared organization of Jewish and Arab citizens working to implement full equality on all levels between the Arab, Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel," Linstrom adds.

Yes, "It's complicated," he says. "But with grassroots efforts at understanding and friendship, there is hope in the long-contested and embattled Holy Land, a hope for peace."

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Coming up

Join us for the film "Jerusalem"

Celebration Cinema North, Grand Rapids

Monday at 6:30 p.m.

\$5 per person or \$15 for a family

Tickets available only at interfaithunderstanding.org