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Mission views Israel through interfaith lens

Local clergy meet people who want 'to move forward in peaceful way'

TEL AVIV — The key take-away for one minister who participated in a recent mission that brought rabbis and Christian clergy to Israel was learning that the majority of the people they encountered — Jews and Arabs alike — “want to move forward in a peaceful way.”

“We met people who could show us the real heartbreak and people who were reaching across divisions to work toward justice,” said the Rev. Stephanie Kaper-Dale of the Reformed Church in Highland Park.

She was one of 27 members of the 10-day interfaith clergy mission hosted by Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey; three rabbis from the federation community and 20 Christian clergy, most of them first-timers in Israel, were among the group.

On Feb. 25, mission members gathered at Robinson’s Arch adjacent to the Western Wall in Jerusalem for an egalitarian prayer service to welcome Shabbat.

Rabbi Marc Kline of Monmouth Reform Temple in Tinton Falls said that when he led the service, he tailored it to the interfaith worshipers. “I did prayers about welcoming each other into our sacred space, and talked about some of the ruins around the arch that spoke from both a Jewish and Christian lens,” he said.

The response to the service, and to the mission in general, was uniformly gratifying and inspiring, said Kline. “We may have different faiths, but learning to grow respect for each other is huge.”



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Worship services were held at St. Georges Cathedral in Jerusalem.

Photos by Rabbi Donald Weber

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He gave an example. When the group was at the Mount of Beatitudes — on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus is believed to have delivered his Sermon on the Mount — “that site doesn’t hold value for me as a Jew, but watching how much value it held for my Christian colleagues made me cry with joy,” said Kline. “I see my Judaism as requiring me to help people celebrate faith — not just my faith, but faith. God is God, and each of us has a different take, but that doesn’t change who God is.”

NJN met up with the mission in Tel Aviv on the final day of the Feb. 24-March 4 tour, where the clergy and other mission members eagerly shared their experiences.

According to federation executive director Keith Krivitzky, who led the mission, it accomplished its goal of strengthening connections between the local community and Israel, educating the participants about Israel, and providing first-hand experiences to dispel biases and build understanding.

“At a time when church bodies are considering joining the anti-Israel boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement, and when many in the Jewish and broader community are not sure what to think about Israel because of skewed coverage in the news and social media, doing a program like this is absolutely critical to presenting a more complex understanding of the reality of the Middle East.

“The long-term impact — in terms of broadening perspectives and engaging those who are less connected to life in Israel — is incredible,” said Krivitzky. “Will everyone who attended the mission emerge a Zionist? No, I don’t think so. But they will definitely emerge with a far better understanding of the very complicated challenges that exist in Israel today, and the fact that that reality is not one-sided.”

For the Rev. Hartmut Kramer-Mills, pastor of First Reformed Church in New Brunswick, who grew up in Germany, visiting Israel helped him put historic events in perspective. “Getting to know Israel is a must for any Christian clergy,” he said. “I share the concern we hear today about the reputation of Israel. There are not many Jews left in Mediterranean countries other than Israel. Currently there is an exodus from France. The world is not a very friendly place for people of the Jewish faith.

“Israel needs to exist in the world to provide that space,” said Kramer-Mills.

The group met with Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders and activists throughout the journey, and visited programs devoted to coexistence, such as the Jerusalem school of the Hand in Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel, and the Roots/Judur/Shorashim Center in the West Bank, an initiative led by Palestinian and Israeli peace activists living in the heart of the conflict.



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The mission provided a “direct connection to the complicated situation of Israel-Palestine, instead of trying to understand it from afar,” said Kaper-Dale, referring to their meetings with people from across the ethnic and political spectrum who were committed to finding pathways to coexistence. “I don’t want to simplify the situation and gloss over it to make it seem like one group is right and one is wrong,” she said, “but I have learned that the majority want to move forward in a peaceful way and work with their neighbors to ensure basic rights for everyone.”

For Rabbi Bryan Kinzbrunner of Highland Park, chaplain at the Oscar and Ella Wilf Campus for Senior Living in Somerset, the interfaith mission provided a unique new look at Israel.

“To hear a Christian hymn while overlooking sites in Jerusalem that are holy to Jews, Muslims, and Christians and to walk to the Western Wall on Shabbat morning with two pastors for the morning service at sunrise — each of us coming for our own spiritual and ritual fulfillment — were experiences I could never have dreamed of sharing,” said Kinzbrunner.

Although he has been to Israel about two dozen times, Rabbi Don Weber of Temple Rodeph Torah in Marlboro said this trip was perhaps the most inspirational. “Going up the Mount of Olives and hearing the pastors sing the Lord’s Prayer next to the place they believe it was first said was simply beautiful,” he said.

“Then the next day when many of them came with me to a Reform synagogue in Jerusalem, I was able to open up a *siddur* and show them the first paragraph of the Kaddish, which is the first paragraph of the Lord’s Prayer, and to show them it was in Aramaic, which is the language Jesus would have spoken.

“The connections we made were wonderful,” said Weber. “I don’t think I have ever heard so many thank yous in my life — to the group leaders, to each of the participants, and to God.”

Discussions are under way, Weber said, to conduct joint interfaith projects in the Heart of New Jersey communities represented in this mission.

Being on the mission fulfilled for the Rev. Vivian Wright, assistant pastor at Hope Church in Bound Brook, one of her most meaningful “bucket list” goals. “To actually stand in the places that you preach and teach about all the time presented a series of ‘aha’ moments,” she said. “I really felt the presence of God.”

The Rev. Tony Cinardo, chaplain and director of pastoral care at Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch, said the trip appealed to him both personally and professionally. He had visited Israel on an archaeological expedition 27 years ago. “This mission provided a chance to see modern Israel through a different lens. The hospital where I work has a large Jewish community. I hold a multi-faith clergy appreciation event, and I hope this trip will provide a chance for the Jewish clergy to get to know me better.”

The mission also met with From the Grapevine founders Jerry and Aimee Ostrov of Long Branch at the Dan Panorama Hotel in Tel Aviv. Through social media, From the Grapevine shares the beauty of Israel with a mostly non-Jewish readership, particularly U.S. college students. “We get two million views a month by people who are interested in food, nature, and travel,” Jerry Ostrov said.

“How can you get people to relate to you if they can’t identify with you? To really engage them you have to reach them through their hearts.”

Jill Garbi moved with her family from Oakhurst to central Israel in July 2012. Before making aliya, she was an NJJN contributing writer.