

Traveling in the Middle East

Even bishops float, travelers from the New England Synod discovered, at the Dead Sea in Qumran, Israel.

The swimming break on a hot afternoon in May was part of a two-week pilgrimage that introduced Bishop Margaret Payne and 23 ELCA members to the Holy Land.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of Christians visit well-known sites like Jerusalem's Via Dolorosa and the Garden of Gethsemane. They come home with their faith and spirit refreshed by their encounter with the roots of the Christian faith.

But in "walking where Jesus walked," it's easy for visitors to inadvertently overlook the people who live where Jesus walked—in a region that struggles daily with conflict and violence.

As a companion synod to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), the New England delegation wanted to make sure its trip also embraced today's residents.

"We wanted to learn from our brothers and sisters what their lives were like, how they face the challenges of the limitations imposed on them, and how they continue to live in the hope of Christ," said Pastor Tim Keyl of Christ the King Congregation in Nashua, N.H.

To achieve that goal, trip leaders worked with Lutheran ministries in Jerusalem to plan a trip that lifted up Christian, Jewish and Muslim voices while allowing plenty of time to explore Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth and Galilee.

The group spent many hours visiting Lutheran schools and ministries and meeting Palestinian Christians for meals and worship. Visits to a mosque and the Museum of the Holocaust, a Shabbat meal, and presentations by Israeli peace activists and Muslim scholars immersed them in Jewish and Muslim perspectives on the current situation.

Verses from Luke 24, the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the disciples, framed each day's prayer and itinerary.

"We prayed the Stations of the Cross along the traditional Via Dolorosa in the Old City of Jerusalem, culminating at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, we sang songs, read Scripture, and rejoiced in how God makes all things new even through suffering and death," said Pastor Keyl.

"Everywhere we went, our question to presenters was 'where do you see hope?' Many told us, 'all that we have is hope.'"

A pre-trip orientation introduced travelers to the situation in the Middle East and let them share their hopes and concerns, especially about personal safety.

"First-time travelers were nervous," said Keyl. "We saw plenty of armed and uniformed men and women, and had to go through multiple metal detectors when approaching the Tombs of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Yet with our U.S. passports and the capable guidance of our leaders, we never felt threatened or in danger."

Planning a balanced trip to the Holy Land
For Lutherans who have been a presence in the Holy Land since the mid-19th century, facilitating visits by North Americans is a priority.

"In a situation that seems increasingly hopeless, it makes a tremendous difference to Palestinian Christians to break bread with their brothers and sisters," said ELCA missionary Rev. Julie Rowe, who is assistant to ELCJHL Bishop Munib Younan in Jerusalem.

Julie and the ELCJHL staff can help ELCA members plan everything from a one-day visit to a two-week trip. "Some groups, like the New England Synod, ask us to integrate ELCJHL ministries and meetings with local leaders into a traditional, full-length Holy Land trip," she explained. "People who have already booked a standard tour often ask me to arrange one or two days of visits to help them touch bases with Palestinian Lutherans."

Talking about on-the-ground safety is also part of her job. "Everybody thinks it's dangerous, but after living here for three years, I think it's safer than U.S. cities like San Antonio, where I'm from," she said.

Julie and the ELCJHL can also set up meetings and conversations with leaders with



Photo Southeast Michigan Synod
People from Southeast Michigan, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour and Bethlehem planting seeds of hope together at Beit Sahour school

different perspectives on the situation in Israel and Palestine. That's important to the Southeast Michigan Synod, a companion synod of the ELCJHL which sends groups twice a year as part of its commitment to the ELCA Peace Not Walls campaign (see sidebar).

"We try to fill the itinerary with people from different religious and political backgrounds, and mix the ancient and contemporary so that people can see how it all ties together," said Pastor Marty Zimmann of St. John Lutheran Church of Dundee, Michigan. "For example, at the Church of All Nations, near the traditional Gethsemane site, we saw a 2,000 year-old olive tree next to an iron gate with bullet holes from the 1967 Seven-Day War."

According to Bishop John Schreiber, nearly 100 Michigan Lutherans have visited the Holy Land in order to increase their awareness of issues in the region. "Our primary goal is to help people get a sense of the political landscape and the church's response in the midst of it," he said. "The number one thing we hear from brothers and sisters there is that we need to be advocates in our own country, so that our government can re-engage the peace process."

Recently a group of Michigan teens spent 10 days exploring the Holy Land and participating in a work project at the Lutheran School in Beit Sahour. Because the ELCJHL school paired teens with local students, they were able to spend time in homes getting to know Palestinian Christian families.

"Being welcomed whole heartedly into their lives was the most important thing to me," said Sarah Bowers, one of the teens who participated. "Even though they are living in a country under military occupation, they have hope. That is amazing!"

New resource offers trip planning assistance

A new Web-based resource, "Visiting the Holy Land and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land" can help you plan a fair and balanced trip that will give you a full picture of what life is like for Israelis and Palestinians, as well as meaningful experiences of biblical sites.

The resource offers:

- Sample itineraries
- Contacts for local Lutheran ministries and guidelines for working with their staff to plan your trip
- Outlines for pre-trip orientation sessions
- Hints for coming, going, and on the ground logistics
- Suggestions for sharing your experience later.

The 20-page resource is free and can be downloaded from www.elca.org/peacenotwalls/accompany/travel.html

New Resources Equip Congregations for Middle East Peacemaking

"Peace Not Walls," the ELCA campaign to learn, pray and act for peace with justice in the Holy Land, is entering its second year.

Since the campaign was adopted by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA has been working with other Lutherans and with ecumenical and interfaith partners toward:

- safety and security for all Israelis and Palestinians
- reduction of poverty and unemployment
- a negotiated final status agreement that includes a shared Jerusalem as capital of two independent states and with access and full rights in the city for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The results are positive, said Carol LaHurd, coordinator of the Peace Not Walls campaign. "We know that interest in Middle East issues is growing among Lutherans. And our partners in the Holy Land tell us that the voiced support of mainline American Christians encourages them and makes a difference in Washington."

Through the Peace Not Walls Web site, www.elca.org/peacenotwalls, your congregation can learn more about the history of the Middle East conflict and current issues, and find ways to participate in the campaign.

In the site's list of frequently asked questions, you can learn why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is important, why the ELCA is involved in the issue, what changes the ELCA advocates, and how you can equip yourself and your congregation to make a difference. Find the FAQ at www.elca.org/peacenotwalls/takeaction/faqs.html

Besides the Web site, three other resources can help you design an adult forum or study group on the Middle East and the ELCA Peace Not Walls campaign, or prepare an orientation for a group planning to visit the Holy Land:

- Colorful bookmarks designed by the Lutheran International Center in Bethlehem that lift up the campaign and its Web site
- A nine-minute DVD, "Forbidden Families," a story about the separation wall and its effect on one Lutheran Palestinian family, that can help your congregation understand the conflict in the Holy Land from the perspective of Palestinian Christians.
- A color photo flyer introducing the ELCA Peace Not Walls campaign.

For copies of these resources, call 800/638-3522 ext. 2642. To learn more about the ELCA's Peace Not Walls campaign, visit www.elca.org/peacenotwalls