

Interfaith peace efforts are ongoing in Pittsburgh

Christians and Jews are working to end the Israeli/Palestinian conflict

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By the Rev. Liddy Barlow and Rabbi Jamie Gibson

In a Feb. 10 Post-Gazette opinion piece, “Who’s Afraid of Interfaith Dialogue?: Pittsburgh Christians and Jews Should Visit the Holy Land Together,” Leila Richards wrote, “The best — and perhaps the only — way that clergy and laity from our faith traditions can arrive on the same page when discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to travel together to the Holy Land.”

We strongly agree.

Last spring, we traveled together to Israel and Palestine as part of the new “Interfaith Partners for Peace” project (www.interfaithpartnersforpeace.org), sponsored by the Jewish Council on Public Affairs. Our delegation consisted of rabbis and clergy from many American cities, traveling in pairs as conversation partners. Together, we visited holy sites and studied sacred scriptures. We observed the Jewish Shabbat and worshiped at a Christian cathedral. We witnessed the tragedy of the Holocaust at Yad Vashem and saw the contemporary pain of the wall dividing the West Bank from Israel. We learned each others’ stories: what it means to identify as part of the Jewish people, what it’s like to read the Hebrew Bible as a Christian, how our communities talk about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

And we listened. We met with religious leaders, civic authorities and grassroots peacemaking organizations in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Tel Aviv and the Galilee. Hearing many diverse perspectives — from an Israeli military spokesperson to a co-author of the “Kairos Palestine” document — our understandings of the conflict were enriched and complicated. We came to understand how deeply people of all the Abrahamic faiths love the land and yearn for its peace and prosperity.

Contrary to Ms. Richards’ suggestion, many rabbis and Christian clergy, such as those who traveled with us and many whom we met on our journey, do indeed care very strongly about a just and equitable two-state solution that provides rights and freedoms for people of all faiths in the Holy Land. To find such a solution, however, we must move away from well-rehearsed talking points and the false simplicity of identifying “two sides,” in order to recognize the complexity and the humanity of a multifaceted conflict.

Nowhere was that clearer to us than in Gush Etzion in the West Bank, where we visited a Palestinian farm surrounded by Israeli settlements. There we met Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian activist who was jailed

during the second Intifada, and Hanan Schlesinger, a rabbi originally from Long Island whose Zionism led him to become an Israeli settler. It was Ali who decided that it was unacceptable to have neighbors who were blood enemies. He arranged to meet Hanan despite their fearful preconceptions of each other.

What unfolded between them was a remarkable sharing. Rabbi Schlesinger came to realize the extent of the human suffering of Palestinians under Israeli occupation. He was surprised just how much the Palestinian narrative mirrored his understanding of the oppression of Jews in countless places over centuries. Although he didn't change his mind about the rightness of the settlement project, for the first time it dawned on him that someone else just might be as attached to the land as he was.

And it seemed to Ali, who now counted Hanan as a friend, that their friendship should be in service of a mutually beneficial goal. The two peoples may never have a perfect marriage in peace. But there could be an amicable divorce, with the recognition of the humanity and standing of the other on the same land. "The Jewish claim to this land is true," he told us. "The Palestinian claim to this land is true. Both truths must fit into one place."

Just as Ali and Hanan modeled a relationship without total agreement, we've also discovered issues on which we do not agree. But our disagreements do not prevent us from engaging in respectful, honest and difficult dialogue. They merely encourage us to strive even harder to understand one another.

People of faith and good will, intelligent people who have thought carefully, may in the end come to differing opinions on complex questions. The goal of our conversations is not to find universal agreement. Indeed, respecting difference is central to interfaith dialogue: We are not trying to convert one another, in matters of faith or politics. Interfaith dialogue should not result in interfaith monologue. But it can result in richer understanding, creative collaborative problem-solving and lasting friendship.

We would be delighted to visit churches, synagogues and community groups to speak about our experience. On April 7, for example, we will be helping to lead a discussion at Rodef Shalom Congregation at noon, part of the Pittsburgh Area Jewish Committee's longstanding series of interfaith dialogues. We also encourage all those interested in peacemaking in the Middle East to learn more about the hopeful projects we visited, including Ali and Hanan's Roots (www.friendsofroots.net), the Hand in Hand bilingual schools (www.handinhandk12.org), and Kids 4 Peace (www.k4p.org). In the end, a donation to these fine organizations may be a more effective way to build peace than the purchase of an expensive plane ticket and a brief study tour.

Finally, we strongly encourage our colleagues to continue to seek out opportunities for relationship and connection, both in Israel and Palestine and right here in Pittsburgh. Build trust, establish friendship, and don't shy away from the hard questions. We know southwest Pennsylvania is not afraid of interfaith dialogue. Let's pursue it with open and compassionate minds.

Liddy Barlow is executive minister of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania. Jamie Gibson is senior rabbi of Temple Sinai in Squirrel Hill.

