



# Oklahoma Conference of Churches

## Religions United Committee

International Interfaith Tour

to Israel and the Palestinian Territories: January 4-11, 2017

Report by William Tabbernee

### *Introduction*

At the suggestion of Rabbi Vered Harris (Temple B'nai Israel, Oklahoma City), the Religions United Committee of the Oklahoma Conference of Churches organized and conducted an International Interfaith Tour to Israel and the Palestinian Territories, January 4-11, 2017. The concept behind the tour was to enable faith leaders from each of the three Abrahamic Traditions to experience first-hand the historical and religious context and the current geopolitical situation in the land which each of these traditions consider “the Holy Land.” It was also decided that it would be ideal if a journalist could accompany us and write up stories about our experiences. We were delighted that Ms. Carla Hinton, Religion Editor of *The Oklahoman* and NewsOK.com, was able to participate. All other participants were also asked to take photos, post comments on social media, and, upon their return to the USA, share their learnings and insights with their own faith communities and other relevant audiences.

### *Participants*

The tour was led by Rabbi Harris, Imam Dr. Imad Enchassi (Senior Imam of the Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City), and the Rev. Dr. William Tabbernee (executive director, Oklahoma Conference of Churches). Twenty-two persons participated in the tour: seven Jews, ten Christians, and five Muslims. Twelve participants came from Oklahoma City or surrounding cities and ten came from the Tulsa area. The complete list of participants is as follows:

Jewish participants:

Rabbi Vered Harris (Leader) (OKC)  
Dr. David Blatt (Tulsa)  
Mrs. Lori Blumenthal (OKC)  
Ms. Rachel Gold (Tulsa)  
Rabbi Abby Jacobson (OKC)  
Rabbi Daniel Kaiman (Tulsa)  
Mr. Michael Korenblit (OKC)

Christian participants:

Rev. Dr. William Tabbernee (Leader) (OKC)  
Dr. Kathy Dodd (Tulsa)  
Mr. Kurt Dodd (Tulsa)  
Ms. Carla Hinton (OKC)  
Ms. Angela Jennings (OKC)  
Deacon William Gorden (Yukon)  
Rev. Dr. Stephen Graham (Norman)  
Rev. Courtney Richards (Tulsa)  
Lt. Col. (ret.) James Mauldin (El Reno)  
Pastor Evan Taylor (Tulsa)

Muslim participants:

Imam Dr. Imad Enchassi (Leader) (OKC)  
Mrs. Judith Enchassi (OKC)  
Dr. Kamran Abbasi (Claremore/Tulsa)  
Mr. Kamran Alam (Tulsa)  
Mrs. Aliye Shimi (Tulsa)

### *Sponsorship*

We are grateful to the Zarrow Family Foundation for generous financial support, which helped to make the tour possible by reducing the cost for participants. We are also grateful to various other organizations, faith communities, and individuals who also assisted in providing funds for participants.

### *Dual Narratives*

The tour was arranged through Mejdi Tours, a company that focuses on “Dual Narratives,” helping participants to experience Israel and the Palestinian Territories with the help of both an Israeli guide and a Palestinian guide.

The Israeli guide was Eldad Brin, a Jerusalem native, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Haifa, and a licensed tour guide since 2006. The Palestinian tour guide, Adam Nerk, was born in Jerusalem but grew up in Amman, Jordan where he went to university. He returned to East Jerusalem as a young adult and has been a tour guide since 2008.

Both guides were extremely knowledgeable about the sacred sites of each faith tradition which we visited and about the current situation. They each shared openly and honestly about the way in which they understood the issues surrounding the (so-called) “Israeli-Palestinian” conflict—and were polite and gracious to each other (and us) even when they disagreed.

Each day of the tour was carefully arranged to provide a balance of visiting sacred sites, some free time for cultural experiences such as sampling local restaurants or shopping in bustling bazaars, and meeting with local Israelis and Palestinians, including leaders of both communities who shared with us their particular perspectives.

### *Sacred Sites*

While in Jerusalem, especially, tour participants of each of the three faith traditions took the opportunity to worship at “shrines” particularly significant to their faith.

For example, a number of the Christians (often accompanied by non-Christian friends) arose early to attend mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and, on one occasion, had mass within the very place which tradition has identified as the tomb of Jesus. Similarly, the Muslim participants arose even earlier to attend prayers on Temple Mount. We were also able to pray at the Western Wall and visited the nearby Davidson Archaeological Park containing the part of the wall not under the control of the ultra-Orthodox—and, therefore, without any restrictions regarding who may pray there. Rabbi Jacobson showed us the special place which was “her” place to worship and explained the history of the struggle for women to have “their place” of prayer at this sacred site.

Other ancient sites visited were the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock, the Mount of Olives, Masada and the Dead Sea, the Church of the Nativity and Shepherd’s Field in Bethlehem, as well as more recent sites with religious and cultural significance such as Yad Vashem (the World Holocaust Memorial Center) in Jerusalem and the Baha’i Gardens in Haifa.

### *Meetings with Israelis and Palestinians*

We were privileged to visit with various groups and individuals from whom we learned a great deal about the complexity of a wide range of interrelated issues affecting the geopolitical context in which Israelis and Palestinians live their everyday lives. One of the most poignant meetings was with two fathers (one Israeli and one Palestinian). Each was the father of a young girl tragically killed by “the opposite side” in Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite the tragedy, the fathers learned to forgive. They have become close friends and work together for peace at the local level via the Parents Circle-Families forum.

Members of the Israeli/Palestinian Center for Research and Information with whom we also met are devoted to developing practical solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Founded in Jerusalem, it is the only joint Israeli-Palestinian public policy think-tank in the world.

Near Jaffa at Neve Shalom/Wahat at Salaam (“Oasis of Peace”), we learned about coexistence at a unique intentional village-style residential community consisting

of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. This community also conducts a school comprised of Jewish and Arab children. In Jaffa itself we visited the Arab-Jewish Community Center which continues to have remarkable success in building increased trust and cooperation between around 3,000 Arabs and Jews.

We also met with representatives of the New Israel Fund (SHATIL) and learned what this organization is doing to advance equality for all Israelis, building a shared, just society, and promoting pluralism and tolerance.

### *West Bank Areas*

All the positive efforts described above are complicated by the geopolitical context. The Palestinian Territories in the West Bank are comprised of three areas, dependent on who has administrative control as per the Oslo 2 Accord (1995).

*Area A* (also includes the Gaza Strip, which we did not visit) is under full control of the Palestinian Authority. Its (more or less) official capital is Ramallah, which we visited. To enter Ramallah (and all Palestinian Territories) we needed to go through Israeli-controlled checkpoints. Israeli citizens are not allowed to enter Area A. In Ramallah we met with a Palestinian civic leader.

Bethlehem is also in Area A and our visit included seeing the Separation Wall and the checkpoint at which Palestinians with work permits for Jerusalem gather at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. each morning for the checkpoint to open at 7:00 a.m. We also visited a Palestinian refugee camp and met with the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem and founder of the Diyar Consortium which conducts programs of education, health and wellness, serving Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the area and beyond.

*Area B* is under full *civil* control by the Palestinian Authority but under joint Israeli-Palestinian control for matters of *security*. We had dinner as guests of a Palestinian family in Area B at Bethany/el-Eizariya, followed by being entertained by (and dancing to) the music of an interfaith band.

*Area C* (over 60 percent of the West Bank) is under full Israeli civil *and* security control of resources, planning, and construction. It is in this area that there is most

tension because of the presence of Jewish settlements and what appears to be the inequitable distribution of natural resources. For example, near Jericho we met with Friends of the Earth Middle East, who not only described their own environmental initiatives to conserve water and other resources, but explained that water from the Jordan was being diverted, enabling only six percent of the water to reach their area. Simultaneously, they reported bureaucratic delays (or refusals) regarding issuing permits regarding alternative water resources. Of course, from the Israeli perspective, this water is a vital resource for the whole of Israel and is needed to serve the total population.

Near Bethlehem, we saw the Nassar family's "Tent of Nations" project which aims to connect peoples of diverse cultures with the land through various environmentally-friendly projects (such as compost toilets). The family's one-hundred-acre farm, in Area C, is surrounded by five Jewish settlements. The Nassars, who are Palestinian Christians, claim that they have legally owned and continuously occupied their farm for almost 100 years. They also reported, however, a great deal of pressure (including the destruction of a significant number of fruit trees) to leave (or even sell) the land to enable the expansion of settlements in the area. The land is considered "state land" by those who want the Nassars to move. Jewish settlements are considered illegal according to international law by those who oppose them, but this interpretation is denied by Israel.

We met with members of the Yesha Council, the Council of Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria, at one of the settlements in Area C. It is clear from this part of the "Dual Narrative" that Jewish settlers who establish (or live in) Israeli communities within the West Bank (or in the Golan Heights) justify their actions on the basis of an (often) Ultra-Orthodox/Zionist ideology/theology which claims that God has given them this land. The representatives with whom we met also expressed a desire to live peacefully with their Palestinian neighbors, but ultimately denied that the Palestinians (whether Muslim or Christian) had any right to the land. The settlers also expressed extreme concern about their own personal safety and security because of the Palestinian population. This concern, obviously, is not unfounded as there have been numerous attacks on Jewish settlers and others by Palestinians who, in turn, justify their actions by claiming that they are fighting to liberate their country and themselves from those who, since 1948, have unjustly occupied *their* land.

## *Learnings*

The complexity of the situation means that we did not come away with any confidence that either the so-called “One-State Solution” or the “Two-State Solution” is a feasible option at this present time. We did, however, come away with a number of “learnings” which gave us greater insights into the issues and challenges which need to be considered and/or resolved in order to bring peace and stability to the region.

1. Nationalism, rather than religion, may be the most important factor driving current positions taken by both sides.
2. When religion is involved, religious ideology (including a particular view of “sacred history”) rather than Post-Modern theology seems to be predominant.
3. Matters of definition often cause misunderstanding and confusion, especially outside of Israel and the Palestinian territories. For example, Israel does not equal Jews or Judaism. Palestine does not equal Arabs or Islam.
4. Social justice for Israelis *and* Palestinians must apply in the fair distribution of natural and other resources both now and as part of whatever “solution” is ultimately implemented to secure peace.
5. The issue of “democracy” must be resolved in a way which safeguards national security for Israel as a “Jewish state” and avoids Palestinians living as “second-class citizens.”
6. Any “solution” to peace between Israel and the Palestinian Territories must involve resolving the status and “control” of Jerusalem.
7. A much greater than expected number of local projects and activities are undertaken in both Israel and the Palestinian Territories by organizations and individuals working for peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding by Jews, Muslims, Christians, and people of no particular religious affiliation.
8. When people are treated with dignity and respect, they will reciprocate.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Tabbernee". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

William Tabbernee  
Executive Director  
Oklahoma Conference of Churches  
February 15, 2017