

## George A. Stallings and MEPI Clergy March for Peace in Jerusalem

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*MEPI marchers pose with their banner at the foot of the Temple Mount, the site of Solomon's Temple. Golden Dome in background is the Al Aksa Mosque.*

The Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) pilgrims spent their last full day, Saturday May 18, in the Holy Land marching arm in arm through the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem chanting, "Peace, Shalom, Salaam Alaikum. Let's Bring Peace to the Middle East!" The group of clergy and scholars were in Jerusalem to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the onset of MEPI, an initiative of the Universal Peace Federation, founded by Father Sun Myung Moon and Mother Moon, of Korea.

About 200 people gathered at the Jaffa Gate on the West side of the Old City of Jerusalem. Archbishop George A. Stallings, chairman of the American Clergy Leadership Conference (ACLC), prayed before the departure and gave appreciation to the disciples of True Parents who were gathered for the unique interfaith march, a signature MEPI gesture. The march was about 1.25 miles long

Carrying a wide banner and wearing blue "Peace" caps, the group marched six abreast through narrow streets lined with vendors before stopping and standing in solemn silence at the entrance to the Via Dolorosa, the street believed to be the path on which Jesus carried his cross. Their numbers had swelled to 200 with the arrival of Father Masoud Abu Hatoum, a Greek Melkite priest from a church near Nazareth and a long-time supporter of MEPI, who came with 100 of his members to join the grand finale event. Marchers included 26 participants from Korea and 16 from Japan.



*MEPI clergy pose at the Olive Tree consecrated by Father Moon in 1965. The tree is 100 yards from the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.*

The group retraced the anguish of the last day of Jesus' earthly life on the Via Dolorosa and prayed at the plaza located at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where many believe Christ was crucified. They later stopped to pray at the pool of Bethesda, where Jesus had performed the miraculous healing of the man who had been lame all his life. Closely huddled together, they laid on hands and prayed for the healing of each other, members of their congregations as well for the healing of the deep wounds of the Holy Land itself. Just a few steps away, they paused for a few minutes to listen to the wondrous choral performance of a group of fellow pilgrims from China who were taking advantage of the legendary acoustics of the Church of St. Anne, also believed to be the birthplace of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

They later stood in silence at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which stands on the stone foundation of the ancient Temple of Solomon, built around 950 B.C.E., and believed by some to be the very location where much earlier Abraham had offered up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. The ministers walked on and then took their place alongside hundreds of Jewish believers, most clad in religious vestments, at the sacred Wailing Wall, believed to be the last remnant of the Second Temple, and which passed from Jordanian to Israeli control only during the Arab-Israeli War of 1967.



*Mrs. Sonya Zoghura, a Palestinian lawyer and magazine editor.*

### **Hearing from the Palestinians**

The clergy then bused to Ramallah to hear a report of the hardships of modern-day Palestinians at a luncheon briefing. Imam Dawud Assad of New Jersey, a senior MEPI participant and a survivor of the Arab Israeli War of 1948 introduced the talk by saying that he was deeply grateful for the investment of Father Moon and Mother Moon, and the MEPI organizers for supporting 45 MEPI pilgrimages in which all voices of the tragic conflict in the Middle East could be heard.

Imam Assad said: “We read in the Koran that ‘one who does not thank people who do good, does not respect God’, and I want to thank Father Moon, and Mother Moon and all those helping this great cause of clearing away misunderstanding. As a Muslim, I know there will be peace in the Middle East, and I never let my heart be depressed.” Imam Assad said that Arabs and Jews lived side by side more amicably in days gone by and that those days will return.

The gathering then heard from Dr. Mustafa Albarghouti, a member of the Palestinian parliament, and by Mr. Jamal Jumea, leader of the Palestinian Residents’ movement. The briefing documented the partition of the West Bank by a 60-foot concrete wall into three large enclosures. The Wall has resulted in the destruction of hundreds of small villages, the closure of markets and the crippling of commerce and industry in the surrounded areas, it was explained.

“In Ramallah, we came to meet the Palestinian people and understand more about their culture and views,” Dr. Michael Jenkins, chairman emeritus of the ACLC and leader of the first MEPI pilgrimage in 2003 explained to Unification News. He added: “MEPI has repeatedly also received briefings from Israeli officials that point out that the rocket attacks and the suicide bombings that have terrorized the population have caused the severe security measures that Israel takes.”



*MEPI ministers pray at the Wailing Wall on May 18th in Jerusalem.*

### **Religious Leaders Can Bring Reconciliation**

Dr. Jenkins went on to say: “MEPI’s sees religious leaders as the ones who can change the hearts of extremists and lead them to drop violence as an option. That’s why the interfaith dialogue has been critical

to support and strengthen faith leaders who stand against attacks against innocent people. Mrs. Jehan Abuelhof Mansoor was our moderator and is a fine Ambassador for Peace who has been organizing educational programs that teach that Peace will be realized through dialogue and cooperation. UPF has organized soccer programs in which Jewish youth from Israel and Christian- and Muslim youth from Palestine meet in peaceful and invigorating competition. “



*MEPI participants Patricia Lalonde, left, and Martine Kobayashi, both from France pose at a garden in Nazareth.*

Mrs. Sonya Zoghura, a Palestinian lawyer and magazine editor, also explained to the gathering that she works with Palestinian families impacted by the violence and does her best to channel their energies toward compassion for all sides. She also told the group that the rising generation of young people in the West Bank shows greater interest in reconciliation than their parents have done.

The ministers and scholars from more than a dozen countries in Europe, the United States and South America expressed gratitude for the tenth anniversary pilgrimage of MEPI, which began in 2003 after the outset of the second Iraqi war. At that time, Father Moon had made effort to bring a new kind of dialogue to the region by bringing clergy from the three Abrahamic faiths into one venue for prayer and reconciliation.

Rev. Mark Abernathy, Lead Pastor, Connect Point Christian Center in Metro Atlanta, made this observation to his colleagues on MEPI: “Jesus brought a message that was so different and not well understood at the time of his life. But later people came to appreciate its meaning. Later in history another man was summoned by God to bring a message that was hard to accept. Father Moon passed away last year. It will take time to understand his message but eventually it will happen. We each have a purpose. There is much diversity here on this MEPI which is obvious when you ride on the same bus with people of different faiths: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim – all one family brought together by the vision of Father and Mother Moon. We must carry on that legacy.”