

Chang Shik Yang Announces the 10th Anniversary Jerusalem Declaration Memorial Program to Mark Tenth Anniversary of MEPI

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Clergy and peace activists from Europe, North America and Asia will meet in Jerusalem on May 16-22, 2013, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI), launched by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. Rev. Moon, also the founder of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), established MEPI in 2003 as a global movement of interfaith pilgrims who rally in the Holy Land to further the cause of reconciliation. Between 2003 and 2008 more than 12,000 clergy, scholars and government officials from around the world participated in MEPI pilgrimages, according to UPF sources.

Dr. Chang Shik Yang, international executive vice-president of FFWPU, announced the 10th Anniversary Jerusalem Declaration Memorial Program in an official memo on April 24, 2013 and explained “[the program] will provide the opportunity for each of our Ambassadors for Peace, WFWP prominent women, Clergy and FFWPU members from all generations to “experience” the vision of unity and reconciliation in Jerusalem. Together we will retrace the historic footsteps of Jesus, understand the heart and faith of Islam and gain deep understanding of the Jewish foundation upon which all Abrahamic faiths trace a common beginning in one God. We will remember True Father’s unchanging love for all faiths and his vision that the faith leaders, when united, have the key to ending the conflicts in the world.”

Participation in this pilgrimage is open to all, according to Dr. Michael Balcomb, president of FFWPU-USA. Those who plan to join are required to pay their own airfare and a tour fee, which will be around \$900.00 for six days and five nights.

MEPI, a key strategic project of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), was launched in 2003 as a Tract II diplomacy effort to bring a wide range of religious perspectives into the center of the search for peace, according to the UPF website.

The Difference MEPI Made

Shelly Elkayam, poetess and researcher at Göttingen University and Hebrew University in Jerusalem, credits the MEPI pilgrimages with changing the hearts and minds of many in the region over a two-year period. She argues in her paper, “A Religious Model in Action: Sun Myung Moon and the Middle East Peace Initiative, 2003 to 2005” that “these MEPI pilgrimages were an educational tool designed by a religious actor as a global model of peace building... [and] represented a new model of interfaith activism carried out during a ferocious war zone and was meant to bring the faiths together and serve the cause of world peace.”

“One of the most compelling aspects of Father Moon is his vision for resolving enmity and hatred, historical resentments and divisions, and creating peace through reconciliation and healing resentments through forgiveness,” Rev. Phillip Schanker, the director of Blessed Family Department, told Unification News in an interview. Rev. Schanker organized and planned the logistics of the first MEPI pilgrimage in 2003. The idea for MEPI came about when Rev. Moon asked Christian pastors to take down their cross on Easter weekend in 2003 and said to them “Take down your cross, go to the Middle East and humbly serve your two brothers, your Muslim brother, your Jewish brother, to help facilitate reconciliation between them.”

“Later that year, we organized the first of many pilgrimages that evolved into the Middle East Peace Initiatives,” recounted Rev. Schanker of the first MEPI pilgrimage in May 2003. “When we arrived there, we first visited Rome and followed the footsteps of Paul and Peter and the missionaries of early Christianity. And then we went to Israel itself. We went to Galilee where Jesus preached; went to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born; went to Nazareth, where Jesus grew up; and went to Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified. And in the process one of the most poignant things that happened was a special ceremony to bury the cross in the Potter’s Field, which was the field where Judas took his life after delivering Jesus up to be crucified. It was an emotional ceremony for all of the pastors remembering Jesus’s sacrifice and how he was betrayed and how he died for our sin. But, if only there had been faith, God’s vision could have been realized at that time.”

Based on the foundation of burying the cross, the MEPI participants visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, other Jewish sites and were the first non-Muslim organization to be invited to the Al-Aqsa Mosque on The Holy Mount, which had been closed to non-Muslims since the Second Intifada. Then there was a reconciliation ceremony held together with rabbis, imams and pastors where the Jerusalem Declaration was signed, according to Rev. Schanker. “With that declaration, each major group acknowledged its historical mistakes and repented for them and agreed to work together to realize peace and harmony,” said Rev. Schanker. He continued, “In a beautiful ceremony, Archbishop Stallings, who is now president of the American Clergy Leadership Coalition, had the foremost rabbis in Israel, including Rabbi Itzhak Bar-Dea of Ramat Gan.”

Joy Pople, director of publications at UPF, reported on the historic reconciliation ceremony that, “For a Christian [Archbishop Stallings] to ask a Jew [Rabbi Bar-Dea] to repent for killing Jesus is an insult to Jewish sensibilities. [But] in a moment inspired by God, the rabbi replied ‘I will sign it if my Muslim brother will sign it with me,’ placing the declaration in a multi-faith context. A sheik from Nazareth walked forward. The three men signed the declaration and embraced.”

“For me, personally being half-Jewish and half-Christian in my ancestry, participating in the MEPI pilgrimage was one of the most meaningful and unforgettable experiences of my life,” Rev. Schanker concluded.

Elkyam concludes in her paper “As an eyewitness – among thousands of others globally and locally – and a MEPI observer, my thesis is that the religious educational principle of ‘living for the sake of others’ has begun to permeate this land’s culture through the innumerable memorable interactions that changed the hearts of many people who to this day do not even know who Rev. Moon was and how much they owe him.”



Ministers and activists gather in the Old City Jerusalem.

Summary of Messages Given at the Signing of the Jerusalem Declaration

Rabbis and other Jewish leaders joined those on the pilgrimage at the Hyatt Regency Hotel on May 18, 2003 for a symposium devoted to Jewish-Christian reconciliation. Dr. Chang Shik Yang opened the gathering by calling for a revitalization of religion around the core understanding of God as the parent of all humankind. Dr. Eliezer Glaubach-Gal, a former Jerusalem city councilman, welcomed everyone to Jerusalem with open arms and blessings.

In his keynote address, Archbishop George Augustus Stallings said, "We came to Israel specifically to repent on behalf of Christianity and ask forgiveness from our Jewish brothers. We feel deeply grateful to our Jewish brethren for keeping the faith and serving as the foundation for the family of God. Yet, we as Christians have misunderstood and persecuted Jews. Under the sign of the cross, we conducted crusades, inquisitions, and pogroms. We blamed Jews for Jesus’ crucifixion when we ourselves are to blame because we glorified the cross. We have used religion to define and separate us rather than to help each other find our way back to God. We need religion not to separate us, not to define us or to divide us, but to help us find our way back to the same God who is Abba, who is Father of us all."

"We must be bold enough and big enough to forgive each other," Archbishop Stallings said. "We have been made in the image and after the likeness of God, whether we be Jew, Christian, or Muslim, and somehow we have to be restored back to that original position where we can see one another as God made us, just as Jacob saw the face of

God in his brother. Jacob said to Esau, 'I pray you, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor have you received me.'



Clergy from many denominations marched in 2003.

The next speaker, Rabbi Itzhak Bar-Dea of Ramat Gan, Israel, described how Judaism sees Christianity as the younger brother who went away from home but has done a great and very important mission: to bring faith to people's hearts. "Wherever there were nonbelievers, the Christian messengers came and brought faith in God," he said. "In that sense I see great value in the work that has been done by Christians throughout history. I have deep respect for Christianity as being embedded in Judaism." There is a prejudice against religions in general as being instigators of conflict. I yearn for the time when religions will become a driving force to bring world peace. I see a great blessing in our coming together as Christians and Jews."

Between presentations, participants wrestled with the difficult issues of the day, such as how forgiveness can help people come together, and whether they have ever forgiven or loved a person from another religion.

Dr. Andrew Wilson introduced his presentation with an analogy of two families meeting at their children's wedding. Wanting to get along with their new in-laws, they make pleasantries and stay on their best behavior. Yet underneath, there are unspoken thoughts of dirty linen and unpleasant memories.

He described the very different perspectives that Jews and Christians bring to interfaith gatherings. "Christians state that God established the Jewish people to receive the messiah. Jesus came as the messiah, but the Jews did not receive him. As a result, Christianity was born as a new religion to carry on where Judaism left off. Christians regard Jews as having a defective doctrine of God, since they deny that God made Himself more accessible to humanity by incarnating as Jesus Christ. Therefore, while in polite company they may praise Judaism as a great religion, yet in their heart of hearts many Christians look down upon the Jews."

In contrast, "Jews regard the religious path of Torah as entirely adequate. They are offended by Christian misrepresentations of their religion scattered about the New Testament. They do not see any superiority in Jesus' ethics over those of the best rabbis. Jews don't believe that Jesus was any kind of messiah. After all, Jesus never accomplished what the messiah is supposed to do: liberate Israel from oppression, bring the Jews back from exile into the Holy Land, and establish world peace. Centuries of Christian violence against Jews — pillaging, rape, confinement to ghettos, forcible abduction of children to be baptized as Christians, expulsions from many nations, and finally the Holocaust — have poisoned the minds of Jews from being able to appreciate the goodness of Jesus Christ."

Dr. Wilson said that Christians in the room had begun to recognize and repent for their anti-Semitism, realizing their failure to live up to Jesus' teachings of forgiveness and love. He appealed to the Jews to appreciate Jesus as a righteous Jew whose words recorded in the Sermon on the Mount are in accord with the best teachings of the sages.

Then, Archbishop Stallings read the declaration of repentance and reconciliation and turned to a prominent rabbi and invited him to join in signing it. For a Christian to ask a Jew to repent for killing Jesus is an insult to Jewish sensibilities. In a moment inspired by God, the rabbi replied: "I will sign it if my Muslim brother will sign it with me," placing the declaration in a multifaith context. A sheikh from Nazareth walked forward. The three men signed the declaration and embraced. Spontaneously, people rushed forward to add their signatures.