

Religious Youth Service Project Brings International Youth to Jerusalem

Tomiko Duggan

December 22, 2013

Director of Public Affairs, UPF-Washington DC USA

Jerusalem, Israel - A Religious Youth Service project in Jerusalem Dec. 18-22, 2013 brought together 41 participants from 15 nations. People from diverse religions, nations and ethnic backgrounds engaged in a program of interfaith education, leadership training and community service. International and local youth of different faiths toured Jewish, Christian, and Muslim historic and holy sites, heard presentations about the geopolitical realities in the region and participated in a community service project.

At the Assembly of the World's Religions in 1985, Rev. Sun Myung Moon inspired the launch of RYS, and more than 220 projects have been organized in 70 nations. This trip during the Christmas season honored the legacy of Jesus and also that of Moses and the Prophet Mohammed in Jerusalem, a holy place for the three Abrahamic religions.

Jerusalem was covered with a blanket of snow when the group arrived. The city had not experienced this kind of accumulation in 60 years. Despite the cold weather, a bright sun shone the next day, and fortunately the weather was beautiful during the entire stay.

The Jerusalem Tower Hotel, where the international participants stayed, is just a 15-minute walk from the Old City, and hotel guests included pilgrims from Sweden, the Ukraine and the US. At breakfast, young and old enjoyed listening to the beautiful prayers by the Ukrainians, who sang like angels.

Tour of Jerusalem

A tour guide described the city's 5,000-year history as we visited several holy sites. Exploring this amazing holy city, we learned about the centuries of struggle for the control over a small area that all three faiths hold dear.

For the international participants, it was their first visit to Jerusalem. The group had to pass two security checkpoints reach the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque. For Jews, this is where Abraham offered his beloved son, Isaac, to demonstrate his faith to God. For Muslims, it was his son, Ishmael, whom Abraham offered, and it was from this point that the Prophet Mohammad ascended on a night journey to heaven.

We were deeply blessed to stand there and sense the spirit of the historic figures who left the legacy of their absolute faith. Our group offered silent prayers for lasting peace in the Middle East and for the hearts of grief of the people to be healed.

At the Western Wall, Jewish men and women pray separately, both covering their heads. This is a remnant of an ancient wall surrounding the courtyard of the Jewish Temple that was destroyed by the Romans. We touched the Wall with heads bowed in respect. One participant said she sensed the vibration of millions of people filled with anguish and longing for peace over the centuries.

We also walked along the *Via Dolorosa* (Way of Sorrow), a route starting from the place where Jesus was sentenced to death, tracing his steps while carrying the cross, and continuing to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher commemorating where he was crucified and his body laid in a tomb.

Standing on the narrow, stone-paved streets, we were overwhelmed by a sense of being among those who watched Jesus carry the cross. Holding hands, we walked in silence, thinking of Jesus and offering prayers. We also walked through the Christian, Armenian, Jewish and Muslim Quarters in the Old City, each reflecting the unique characteristics of their history, culture and religion.

Forum at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Six Interfaith scholars and geopolitical experts briefed us on the current developments in this region from the religious and political perspectives.

The chief representative for Israel to Islamic nations, Dr. Haim Koren spoke about the crisis in Southern Sudan, Israel's support for refugees, and its focus on human rights and security. He emphasized the power of fasting and the power of faith when facing difficult moments in life.

Professor Ephraim Meir, a Jewish and interfaith scholar, expressed enthusiasm to meet youth interested in interreligious perspectives on peace. Saying that he received energy from seeing the mosaic of people from RYS, he added: "Religion can contribute to conflict, and religion can contribute to civilization.

Religion can cause division, and religion can inspire and influence politicians to move toward peace."

An expert on Kabbalah, a mystical branch of Judaism, Mr. Kobi Nehushtan spoke about the need to experience a "tipping point," an inner reflection that sparks a transformation and experience of the higher power of God, such as that reported by the Prophets. "We must learn from all religions and become agents of change," he said.

Mrs. Naomi Tsur spoke about her experiences as former deputy mayor of Jerusalem and noted that a variety of approaches are necessary to achieve lasting peace. In the words of Albert Einstein "You cannot solve a problem by using the same parameters that created the problem."

A Middle East expert, Mr. Menashe Shaul gave his ideas on the benefits of achieving peace with Egypt. Peace with Egypt would encourage peace with other Middle Eastern nations, reduce each country's military budget, and allow funds to be redirected to community building and development. Peace would then bring 'rest' to the region.

Mr. Daniel Sherman, an international relations expert, offered an analysis of the current geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and described two options for peace: (1) a cold peace, which is a stalemate between people who understand themselves as adversaries but who agree to refrain from violence, and (2) a warm peace in which people value life over ideology, recognizing that they have to live together rather than fighting and perhaps dying together.

Finally, Mr. Dani Rubenstein, a senior journalist, expressed regret to see few Arabs or Palestinians in the group. He views the economy as the driving factor for nation-building for Palestine and reported that the average annual income in Palestine is \$4,000, while in Israel it is \$35,000. He stressed the importance of oil-producing Arab nations helping to relieve the burdens of the Palestinian people.

Community service

Participants spent a day at Al Amal School, which provides care for disabled Palestinian children who lost their families. It offers shelter, education and training to prepare the children to live on their own when they reach 21 years of age, with hope for a good future. Al Amal is in the Palestinian town of Bethany, east of Jerusalem.

The school provides help according to the degree of physical or mental disability, including therapy, education, life skills, and medical care. The RYS participants were moved by the Palestinian staff's professional standard and devotion to the children.

Teams visited classrooms to teach computer use, play with children in wheelchairs, help with physical exercise and paint pleasant images on a wall. While eager, participants were initially unsure how to be helpful. But their concerns diminished as they mingled with the children and built friendship. Participants commented that they probably received more joy from children than they were able to give.

Discussion with Palestinian students

Professors and students at Al Ahliya Community College in East Jerusalem offered participants a warm welcome. Professor Dr. Munib Mansoor expressed hope for democracy in the fledgling Palestinian state, while acknowledging that it is still far off. He believes there are elements in Islamic culture that favor the development of democratic institutions but cautioned that the state should not be governed by economic elites but become a truly democratic society.

In the roundtable discussion that followed the RYS participants could learn about the Palestinian perspectives and students' feelings regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Middle East Peace Initiative Conference

Dr. Chang Shik Yang, Chairman of UPF, Dr. Thomas Walsh, President of UPF International, and Dr. Frank LaGrotteria, Director of RYS International, invited participants to join the Middle East Peace Initiative conference at the Dan Hotel. Dr. Yang described the vision and ten-year history of the Middle East Peace Initiative inspired by Rev. Moon.

There were 11 participants from Austria, 8 each from Israel and the US, 7 from Great Britain, 4 from Japan, 3 from France, 2 each from Australia and Germany, and 1 each from Canada, Cyprus, Georgia, Jordan, Russia and Ukraine. They all received a Certificate of Appreciation. They created a blog and promised to keep in touch with one another.