

“Sacred Journey to Israel-Palestine”

Since 2004, Fitchburg Memorial UCC and the Southwest Association have had a partnership with Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. Our partnership was created to provide an opportunity to learn about and connect with our sisters and brothers who live in this sacred place and who struggle to live out their faith in the face of occupation and oppression. Since 2004 we have traveled to Israel/Palestine eight times and we have hosted people from that region in our churches and our Conference. In 2014 the Conference Board of Directors approved a Conference wide partnership committee so that churches throughout the Conference could learn about and participate in the partnership.

This region, often referred to as the “holy land,” is the cradle of all three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). It is a place of sacred sites and sacred stories; it is also an incredibly complex place socially, culturally, and politically. In April 2017, we will be taking another “sacred journey to Israel-Palestine” as part of our partnership and we invite you to consider traveling with us to see the holy sites of our tradition and to meet with people we call the “living stones” of our faith.

We will begin our trip in the town of Bethlehem where Jesus was born. We will worship at Christmas Lutheran Church, one of our Global Ministries partners, and meet people who seek to embody Jesus’ message and live out God’s vision for our lives. We will sit on the hillside along the Sea of Galilee imagining Jesus teaching his disciples and healing those who came to hear him tell of God’s love. We will walk down steps that take us back over two thousand years to the stone streets where Jesus played as a child in Nazareth. We will go up to Jerusalem to hear echoes of Jesus’ voice as he prayed and wept on the Mount of Olives. We will walk through the streets of the Old City to see the sacred holy sites honored by Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

We will try to understand the historical value of this sacred place to all three Abrahamic peoples as well as its claim on them today. We will visit Hebron, where Abraham and Sarah are buried, now one of the most contentious sites and cities in the holy land. We will dip our feet in the Jordan where Jesus was baptized. We will visit Qumran, the site where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. We will stand on the shores of the Dead Sea; we will look out upon the stark landscape of the Judean desert, where ancient ones learned to trust God to carry them to new life.

This trip is not just about seeing sacred sites, however. This journey will be different from many traditional tourist experiences as we take time for dialogue and relationship-building along the way. The Holy Land today is a land scarred by walls, checkpoints, hatred, and violence. It is impossible to visit this land without noticing the conflict and struggling with its affect on the people who live there. As we travel in the region, we will talk with Palestinians and Israelis who are working to break down those barriers, mend the wounds, and create a more compassionate and just society for themselves and their neighbors. We will spend time with some of our Global Ministries partners and other organizations and people - Palestinian and Israeli - who are on the ‘front lines’ of the suffering and the hope of this region. It is through these people, the “living stones”, that we will see what God is doing today in this sacred and troubled land.

Consider joining us for this “sacred journey” to Israel-Palestine. Be part of a movement to build greater understanding and foundations for peace in this land considered holy by many.

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Our trip is scheduled for April 20-30, 2017. We prefer to keep the group size small (10-15) in order to travel around the area more easily and have more intimate conversations with people we meet. Deadline for registration is November 1, 2016. Cost of the trip will be around \$3000, based on double occupancy. For more information or to sign up, contact Bonnie Van Overbeke at bonnievano@aol.com or 608-274-1859.

A word of caution... This is not a bus tour trip. We will, indeed, do a lot of walking on uneven pavement, sometimes for a couple hours at a time. We stay in Guest Houses and local hotels; participants must carry their own luggage. Travelers must be in good physical shape.