

## **Interfaith group heads to Holy Land 'Seeing complicated place through eyes of my sisters and brothers'.**

**Kim Zarzour, yorkregion.com, 31 Mar 2011**

**<http://www.yorkregion.com/news/article/974094--interfaith-group-heads-to-holy-land>**

Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders are organizing a unique group tour of sacred sites in Israel and the Palestinian territories this fall — the first of its kind in Canada.

"In the Path of Abraham" is a week-long, multi-faith trip designed to bring together about 100 followers of the three faith groups with shared links to the Holy Land. Organizers hope it will help them understand each other and bring that understanding back to Canada.

Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl, Father Damian MacPherson representing Catholics, Imam Abdul Hai Patel and Protestant Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton will lead a group of equal numbers of Jews, Christians and Muslims on a tour of cities and sites that are meaningful to their religions.

The travellers will also meet with significant local religious and political figures and visit community projects working to foster peace between Arabs and Jews.

The faith leaders and the Israeli government's Consul for Tourism met Tuesday for a multicultural breakfast at a kosher restaurant in North York to officially launch the project that has been months in the making.

"You can get a sense of the enthusiasm we share here," said Father MacPherson, director of ecumenism and interfaith affairs with the archdiocese of Toronto. "[Israel] is such a dynamic place and we will learn a lot from having our feet on the holy ground. There may be a minefield here and there ... but we're not expecting it. This group will hang together and learn from each other."

The group plans activities ranging from a Christian sermon while boating on the Sea of Galilee to a lecture by Bethlehem's deputy mayor and a visit with a group of Israeli and Palestinian families who've lost loved ones in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The project was initiated by Hanan Perahia, with Thornhill's Aufgang travel agency, who described the idea to Rabbi Frydman-Kohl, senior rabbi of Beth Tzedec Congregation. He learned Rabbi Kohl shared the same goal and was eager to work with him.

"I have always had a dream to create such a group but I knew it was not going to be easy," said Mr. Perahia, who grew up in Israel. Finding leaders with enthusiasm for the inter-faith movement was not difficult; the challenge, he said, was in creating an itinerary that everyone could agree upon and that avoided extremism.

"We didn't want to be just touristy. We wanted to bring lectures and look at the issues" that Palestinians and Israelis struggle with, he said.

After months of meetings, the leaders have put together a jam-packed schedule for Sept. 4 to 10 with visits to Christian sites such as Mt. of the Beatitudes and Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, Jewish sites such as the Western Wall and Yad Vashem and Muslim sites such as Al Aqsa Mosque and Nebi Musa.

"Everyone has worked together in such a co-operative way," he said. "The fact that we will have the three religions on the same bus together, eating together, exchanging views, seeing the sites that are important to each other and then come together to talk about it, this is fantastic."

Dr. Hamilton, who is General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches and a biblical scholar, is accompanying the group not in an official capacity but as an "individual initiative, for a chance to see a particularly complicated place in the world through the eyes of my sisters and brothers of so many faith traditions.

"I expect there will be difficulties. There will be tough times, but we bring an attitude of respect and graciousness and willingness to deal with tough things."

She's curious, for example, to learn why 65 per cent of Israel's 3.5 million annual tourists are Christian, but the number of Christians living in the Holy Land is plummeting.

"I look forward to seeing modern reality on top of layers of history," she said. "It's not Disneyland, it's a real place with real people with joys and sorrows like everyone else."

Imam Patel, president of the Ontario Multifaith Council, said he is also looking forward to returning to a region he said offered "the best hospitality in the Middle East".

The Muslim chaplain at the University of Toronto brought laughter to the breakfast meeting as he described his visit to Israel in 1992 when he lost his shoes and ended up "walking through the streets like the prophets did". When he finally found a shoe store, the shopkeeper insisted on giving him new shoes for free.

The leaders have defined five goals for the group, including raising awareness about the complexity of religious issues, understanding the political issues and how they affect peace, promoting "citizen diplomacy", improving relationships and advocating for mutual understanding as a key to peace.

The trip has been endorsed by Thornhill MPP Peter Shurman. "I am confident that this encounter with the Holy Land will only be the beginning of a remarkable initiative."

Mr. Perahia hopes the excursion will be an annual event and include younger generations in following years.

"We hope people will come back to Canada seeing things differently, not just the CNN view which shows only the bad parts," he said. "There is also good news worth publishing that will show there is hope and human beings from all faiths can communicate, talk and be friends."

Father MacPherson agreed. "Some will probably see things they don't like, and we won't be able to hide from one another."

It's a dynamic part of the world, he said, but the group remains optimistic the trip will succeed. Last week's bus bombing in Jerusalem "just sent chills through me," he said. "Something like that could just can it at any time, with the way the Middle East is broiling right now. [But] we will keep plowing the ground, planting seeds."

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