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North Carolina interfaith mission learns about dialogue

Apr. 26, 2009

sam greenberg , THE JERUSALEM POST

"Relationships help build bridges between different religions and different cultures, and help to shape people's mindsets," said Jehan Benton, one of 29 Jewish and Christian leaders touring Israel as part of the 2009 Greensboro Interfaith Study Mission.

The relationships Benton and other participants referred to were already at work, as evidenced by the group's closeness and warmth. They hoped these ties, as well as lessons learned from observing Israeli society, would be taken home and used to strengthen and connect the Jewish and Christian communities of the North Carolina city.

The mission, which includes politicians, neighborhood activists, religious leaders and educators, arrived last week and will remain until Thursday. It has been touring religious and historical sites, borders, schools and community centers.

It is sponsored by the Greensboro Jewish Federation, the National Conference for Community and Justice and the Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro. The United Jewish Communities helped in organizing the mission, which is the fifth to come to Israel since 1994.

Among the issues participants have been exploring are religion as a force for justice, ways to establish dialogue and ties between communities, and methods for conflict resolution.

"I just think that it's very important for different people in the community to come together in a measurable, significant way that you just can't do meeting each other at cocktail parties or having lunch together every three months," said mission co-chair Nancy Brenner. "What this does, putting you into such a close environment - 10 days on a bus - you just get so comfortable with each other and you just form friendships and a community."

Brenner and fellow co-chair Shirley Frye planned the trip, recruited participants and wrote grant proposals for scholarship money.

"All of my professional life I have tried to forge groups together for better understanding," Frye said. "All of us have more similarities than differences."

Many of the participants said they had benefitted from the group's racial, religious and professional diversity.

Reverend Mark Brainerd said he appreciated having "the opportunity to join together with people of other faiths and to experience the history of our common faith and the ways that we're different through one another's eyes."

Brainerd added that while he had always tried to be understanding of people from different faiths, living with Jewish people made him realize that he still saw the world "through Christian eyes." With that realization, he hoped he could become even more understanding of other perspectives.

For many, the casual interaction among participants was an essential part of the mission.

"The conversation at the dinner tables and away from the sites is the real heart of this type of trip," said Benjamin Cone.

Throughout the trip, the group has learned how to build relationships between diverse communities.

"We make sure to include in our trip a great deal of dialogue," said Marilyn Chandler, who added that the goal was "to build social capital for our city and to build up interfaith relations."

She said the group would bring home concepts from educational models they visited, such as the Yemin Orde youth village south of Haifa that serves many immigrants, and Yad B'Yad, a network of four bilingual schools for Israeli Arabs and Jews.

"You take home the experiences of seeing these people, seeing Israel through their eyes," said Brenner. "It's mind opening. It makes me think of things differently and look at things differently, which is always healthy."

"It's important that Christians, who are the majority of the United States, understand the importance of Israel," Cone said.

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