**Holy Land / Living Water:**

**A shared journey of collaboration & regeneration along the Jordan River**

**Introduction**

**When people of diverse spiritual backgrounds open up to one another with respect, curiosity, and a sincere desire to discover common ground, partnerships and friendships can evolve in profound and unexpected ways.** At a time of great challenge in the world and in the Middle East, a diverse interfaith and intercultural group, Holy Land/Living Water, journeyed to Jordan, Palestine, and Israel with the mission of sharing interfaith events, collaborating in peace-building projects, and supporting programs to promote social well-being through ecological sustainability. Co-sponsored by UNITY EARTH, EcoPeace Middle East, and United Religions Initiative (URI), the delegation comprised ninety-two people from around the world, including Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, indigenous and interfaith spiritual leaders, social entrepreneurs, academics, diplomats, musicians, ecologists, filmmakers, and peace activists. Rabbi David Rosen, Advisor on Interreligious Affairs to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, was a Patron for the event. Our mission was to bring a spirit of harmony and peace to the ancient sites and modern communities we visited and to serve as a living demonstration of interfaith and intercultural congeniality and creative collaboration.

**Holy Land Itinerary**

Throughout the week we visited sites of deep spiritual significance to the three Abrahamic religions of the Holy Land, including: Mount Nebo, from whose heights Moses saw the Promised Land; Al Maghtas, site of Christ’s baptism; Abu Obeida Mosque, burial site of one of the Prophet Muhammad’s companions; the Mount of Temptation, where Christ resisted Satan; the Church of the Nativity; the Western Wall; the Dome of Rock; Jerusalem Archaeological Park; Ethiopian Orthodox Church; the Sea of Galilee (Kinnaret); Megiddo, known as Armageddon; Beit Ha’gefen (the Arab-Jewish Center); and Bahá’í Centre and Gardens, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Many of these stops included conversations and talks with local leaders and clerics.

**Five Modes of Interfaith Exchange**

Our journey centered on four primary modes of interfaith exchange:

1. Promoting Shared Values through Shared Ecology
2. Peace Building
3. Interfaith Ceremony
4. Formal and Informal Discussion
5. Intercultural Music and Celebration

**1. Promoting Shared Values through Shared Ecology**

A primary focus of Holy Land/Living Water was the condition of the Lower Jordan River and the bodies of water it flows out of and into, the Sea of Galilee (Kinnaret) and the Dead Sea.

* **Dead Sea Convergence:** Water diversion and the dumping of waste have depleted the Jordan River and reduced it in places to a slurry of sewage. Recognizing that environmental success depends on the collaboration of faith leaders, EcoPeace forms partnerships with community leaders on both sides of the Jordan to clean up the river. Near Amman, Jordan, we attended the Dead Sea Convergence, a conference at which Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders, including Sheik Abdul Aziz al Nuaimi, the “Green Sheik,” as well as members of EcoPeace, discussed projects to build peace through environmental cooperation among neighbors.
* **Environmental Partnership in Tiberias:** Over dinner in Tiberias, Israel EcoPeace Israel director Gidon Bromberg and Mayor of Jordan Valley Regional Council Eidan Breenbaum, discussed their projects to reduce pollution and improve water quality in the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee. Unity Earth presented an award to EcoPeace for their 25 years of pioneering work.
* **Presence of University of Connecticut professors:** Four University of Connecticut faculty members working in journalism, social work, and Middle East Studies were members of the delegation. The university’s Office of Global Affairs supports intercultural communication, and community engagement, hosts UConn Abrahamic Programs for Academic Collaboration in the region, and co-sponsored the Dead Sea Convergence.

**2. Sharing Interfaith Ceremony**

At places of worship along the route, at historic sites, and in natural areas, the congeniality and the spiritual diversity of our group inspired offerings of prayer and ceremony, both planned and spontaneous.

* **Mount Nebo:** On the summit of the mountain from which Moses gazed at the land his people would enter without him, faith leaders of the three monotheistic religions made prayers for a new vision of the Promised Land, and Rev. Sylvia Sumter read the chilling words of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the night before he was assassinated: “I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.” Later, the group shared personal visions of a Promised Land where Jewish, Muslim, and Christian children can play together on the banks of a restored Jordan River.
* **Al Maghtas:** On the bank of the Jordan, where Christ was baptized by John the Baptist, Christian clerics offered a baptism ceremony to anyone who wished it, while three Buddhist monks from Thailand stood nearby chanting prayers.
* **Al Obeidu Mosque:** We were welcomed at the mosque with tea and snacks and then were able to enter to pray and pay respects at the tomb of Abu Obeida, a friend and companion of the Prophet Muhammad.
* **The Western Wall:** On a cold moonlit night, members of our group accompanied Rabbi Eliyahu Maclean to the Western Wall, where we joined Jewish worshippers in prayer.
* **Healing Women~Healing Water ceremony:** In Tiberias, several members of the group, both women and men, arose before dawn for an interfaith ceremony, Healing Women~Healing Water. Women representing Abrahamic and indigenous spiritual traditions poured waters, imbued with prayers, into a bowl that was then emptied into the Sea of Galilee.

**3. Peace Building**

* **May Peace Prevail on Earth Ceremony:** On the opening night of our gathering, Fumi Johns Stewart, executive director of May Peace Prevail on Earth, led a ceremony in which participants circled a mandala of flags representing every nation on Earth and, naming each country in turn, prayed for peace in them all.
* **Presentation of Peace Pole to the Governorate of Bethlehem:** In Bethlehem, representatives of Unity Earth presented a Peace Pole to Luay Zaool, a leading official of the Governorate of Palestine. The Peace Pole that had previously stood in that sacred city had been riddled with bullets and was no longer standing.
* **Peace Pole ceremony at Ethiopian Church:** At the tiny Ethiopian Orthodox chapel at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Ambassador Mussie Hailu and Prince Ermias Sahle Selassie, whose grandfather, Haile Selassie, led the Ethiopian Church to independence from the Coptic Church, joined Fumi Johns Stewart to present a Peace Pole to leaders of that congregation.
* **Megiddo ceremony:** After climbing to the rocky heights of Megiddo, familiarly known as Armageddon, where the final battle between good and evil is prophesied to occur, our group held a ceremony dedicated to peace. Indigenous leaders and women elders from several lands offered prayers, and every person in the circle called out one particular quality, such as hope, health, peace, and joy, that they wished offer to the Holy Land. “We retold a very old story that has been in humanity’s cultural psyche for generations,” said Diné (Navajo) healer Pat McCabe.

**4. Formal and Informal Discussions**

* **Discussions on bus:** On bus rides, which varied in length from thirty minutes to several hours, and over meals, people who known each other for years and those who had just met in the Holy Land quickly segued from introductory questions about name and homeland to deep discussions of our spiritual backgrounds and how they informed, and were informed by, our experiences on the trip
* **Formal Discussion and Lunch at a Druze Community:** We were graciously received by members of the Druze community in Isfiya, Israel, along with their Muslim, Jewish, and Christian friends and neighbors at a gathering convened by Ambassador Bahij Mansour, Mayor of Isfiya, and Rabbi David Rosen, Advisor on Interreligious Affairs to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. After welcoming speeches, we all enjoyed a family-style lunch, in which visitors and locals got to know one another. The members of this community offered a powerful example of how people of different faiths can live and work together.
* **Visit to Beit Ha’gefen:** At the Arab-Jewish Cultural Center in Haifa, we joined our hosts for a closing ceremony dedicated to celebrating interfaith friendship. Everyone present was moved by the video of a musical performance, “One Day,” a jubilant expression of unity with 3,000 Jews and Muslims singing in three languages, a project led by the social music initiative Koolalam in collaboration with Beit Ha’Gefen, the Haifa Municipality, and the Port of Haifa.

**5. Intercultural Music and Celebration**

* **U-Nite Concert:** The culmination of our journey was a free concert, open to the public and featuring UNITY EARTH and local musicians such as Café Jalal, the Jewish-Arab group. Dr. Einat Kalisch-Rotem, mayor of Haifa, attended the concert and was among those who addressed the diverse audience.
* Music enlivened and deepened many of our visits and ceremonies. At Al Maghtas, for example, Kristin Hoffmann of the United States sang the American gospel song “Down to the River to Pray” as members of the group joined clerics at the riverbank for a baptism ceremony.

**The Inner Interfaith Exchange**

A description of this remarkable journey would not be complete without an attempt to articulate the powerful way in which the experience affected each individual and the group as a whole. We did not punctuate visits to important places with chatter about mundane topics. Instead, the spiritual biographies of the members of the group, the grief and the possibility that places and people we encountered opened in us, and our joy in our shared purpose flowed non-stop, as the Jordan River flows through its beautiful, ancient valley.

**Religious Leaders and Dignitaries Participating in the Trip**

His Imperial Highness Prince Ermias Sahle Selassie, Ethiopia—President of the Crown Council of Ethiopia

Sheik Abdul Aziz al Nuaimi, the “Green Sheik”, United Arab Emirates—environmentalist and social change leader in the Arab world

Fr. Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadamm, The Vatican—Coordinator of the Sector on Ecology and Creation, Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

Audrey Kitagawa, USA—Chair, Parliament of the World’s Religions

Rabbi Ellen Bernstein, USA—Author and founder of Shomrei Adamah, the first Jewish environmental organization in America

Ben Bowler, Australia—Founder and Executive Director of UNITY EARTH

Gidon Bromberg, Israel—Co-founder of EcoPeace Middle East and Israeli Director of EcoPeace

Haji Sayed Salman Chishty, India—26th Generation Gaddi-Nashin (Hereditary Custodians/Key Holders) of the Sufi line

Rocky Dawuni, Ghana—Musician and UN Goodwill Ambassador for the Environment

Dr. Phramaha Boonchuay Doojai, Thailand—Chairperson of the Asian Interfaith Network on AIDS and director of Chiang Mai Buddhist College

Rabbi Gabriel Hagai, Israel-France—Faculty member,Institut Catholique de Paris

Ambassador Mussie Hailu, Ethiopia—Director of United Religions Initiative Global Partnerships

Rev Cameron McAdam, Australia—Uniting Church Minister

Devi Mohan, Slovenia—Mohanji Foundation

Rev. Deborah Moldow, USA—Interfaith minister and founder of Garden of Light, retired Representative to the United Nations of the World Peace Prayer Society

Rabbi David Rosen, Israel—Advisor on Interreligious Affairs to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland

Fumi Johns Stewart, USA—Executive Director, May Peace Prevail on Earth International and The Peace Pole Project

Ambassador Anil Trigunayat, India—Distinguished Fellow at Vivekananda International Foundation and Member of the Indian Foreign Service with past service in Jordan, Libya, Sweden, and other countries

 Monica Willard, USA—United Nations Representative for United Religions Initiative

**Indigenous Representatives:**

Mindahi Crescencio Bastida Muñoz, Totomi-Toltec, Mexico—Director of the Original Caretakers Program, Union Theological Seminary Center for Earth Ethics and General Coordinator of the Otomi-Toltec Regional Council in Mexico

Pixie Burns, Ngarigu/Ngarakabul, Aboriginal Australia

Rev. Angelica Cubides, Ecuador—Peace Representative for the World Peace Prayer Society

Jason Kelly, Mutthi Mutthi / Wamba Wamba, Aboriginal Australia

Chief Phil Lane, Chickasaw-Yankton Dakota, Founder of Four Winds International Institute, North America

Pooki Lee, Native Hawaiian, North America

Martha Many Grey Horses, Kainai First Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Canada

Pat McCabe (Weyakpa Najin Win, Woman Stands Shining), Dineh (Navajo) Nation, North America

**Musicians**

Rocky Dawuni, Ghana—Musician and United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for the Environment

Pato Banton and Antoinette Hall, USA—Reggae music Grammy Award nominees and URI Goodwill Ambassadors of the Golden Rule

Kristin Hoffman, USA—Ethereal Renaissance pop singer and composer

**Media Coverage and Addenda**

* Kumu map
* brochure about the trip
* David Israel, “Clergy From Around the Planet Gathered to Pray for the Environment at Megiddo National Park,” JewishPress.com, February 7, 2020, https://bit.ly/38rGfbY
* “Living Water Festival in Megiddo Brings Spiritual Leaders Together,” i24 News, February 24, 2020 https://www.facebook.com/106993140795090/videos/495312371160640/UzpfSTcxNjQ0NzMyOTpWSzoyNjU0MTAxNzg3OTcyNzY3/
* Mindahi Bastida, “Holy Land Living Water,” Center for Earth Ethics <https://centerforearthethics.org/author/mbatisda/>
* Trebbe Johnson, “Pilgrimage to the Promised Land,” to be published in *Parabola* Magazine in Summer, 2020