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Camp Teen Accords

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By G. Jeffrey MacDonald

In Middle East peacemaking, grassroots activists have looked past religious differences and sought common ground elsewhere, such as in parents' desire to provide a healthy, secure future for their children. But a different model is now gaining momentum as it builds on a bold premise: religious particularities are an asset, not a liability, and deserve serious attention in peacemaking.

That model informs [Jerusalem Peacebuilders](#), a growing network of camps for Israeli and American teens. What began two years ago in Brattleboro, Vermont, will spread this summer to [Camp Allen](#) Conference and Retreat Center in Navasota, Texas. Teens at both sites are encouraged to be as faithful as they wish to their religions, and to learn what their traditions have teach about peaceful coexistence.

"If you don't understand the other person's religion then you don't understand what's at the heart of his or her being," said the Rev. Nicholas Porter, [rector](#) of [Trinity Church](#) in Southport, Connecticut, who founded and directs Jerusalem Peacebuilders with his wife, Dorothy.

Jerusalem Peacebuilders is affiliated with [Kids4Peace International](#) (K4P), a Seattle-based sponsor of year-round camps in Jerusalem and the United States. So popular is K4P programming that three Jerusalem families apply for every one spot available, according to the Rev. Joshua Thomas, K4P's executive director.

"We're in a time of great growth," Thomas said. "We're continuing to expand, to add more first-year camps for 12-year-olds to enter the program, and also more follow-up experiences all the way across the adolescent years."

Participation in K4P has climbed from an annual average of 50 teens in the past decade to 200 in 2012. By 2018, the group plans to have 1,200 enrolled participants in yearly activities, Thomas said.

The allure needs explaining. Jerusalem-area families do not see these K4P programs as tickets to carefree fun, privilege, or prestige. On the contrary, involvement often comes with social costs. It means taking part in Jerusalem gatherings that defy insular social norms.

One Jewish woman in Israel told Porter: “We all pay a price to participate in this program. Our families and our friends all think we’re freaks. We don’t get invited to the same parties anymore. Our neighbors aren’t friendly. Some of us don’t get the job promotions that we wanted. Our kids don’t always get to make the friends they wanted because people think they’re like traitors. But by adding the stages on to the camp system, you give us hope for a different life.”

For kids growing up amid Jerusalem’s tensions, these programs can be a staple of life for as many as four years. Twice a month during the school year, K4P brings the same group of kids together across religious and ethnic lines for activities and dialogue in Jerusalem. Then in the summer, some will go a step further by traveling (sometimes with financial assistance) to the United States for a camp experience in a natural setting far removed from the social and political pressures of home.

Until this year, camps were offered for only the youngest and oldest kids in the program. At age 12 or so, kids attend camps in Ashville, Atlanta, Boston, or Burlington (Vermont). Those who show greatest promise and stay with the Jerusalem programming through age 15 are invited to attend Porter’s Leadership Camp at **Acer Farm** in Brattleboro.

Now gaps are being filled in to allow for annual U.S. camp experiences. As many as 48 of those who completed a first-year camp last year will progress to Camp Allen this year when they’re 13. In 2014, Camp Allen will start accommodating 14-year-olds.

By the time they’re 15 and ready for Leadership Camp at Acer Farm, participants will have had three prior years of camp experiences — perhaps enough to form lifelong habits of mind and heart, organizers hope.

Teens who’ve done the Leadership Camp say they’ve learned to question some conventional wisdom. That was the case for Jiries Elias, a Palestinian Christian who attended the camp last year.

“I thought that there was no reason to fight and that everything can work peacefully without wars or bombings,” Elias said. “It created a very strong relationship between me and the others.”

Expanded camping reinforces the programs’ bold approach of emphasizing faith. Encouraging teens to understand and own their religious identities equips them, organizers say, for the hard work of understanding and respecting people they’ve often been taught to fear.

Even before the first day of camp begins, respect for faith is a focus. For the next two years, enrollments at first-year K4P summer programs will be scaled back to reflect the inability of many Muslims to attend since the holy month of Ramadan falls during summer.

When Leadership Camp convenes at Acer Farm, participants are encouraged to be as observant as they wish. They pray together three times a day, observing their respective traditions. They make a point to listen to one another’s prayers. No one is expected to utter the prayers of someone else’s tradition.

Meanwhile, as the Leadership Camp prepares to grow from 12 to 24 campers in 2014, worship spaces are being built for each of the three Abrahamic traditions. A Russian Orthodox-style chapel, built last summer, provides space for

Christian worship. But it has also become a meditative sanctuary where Muslim and Jewish campers go on their own, sometimes after dinner, for private prayer and listening for God.

“Jerusalem Peacebuilders puts into practice the assertion that ‘three families can become one’ for the purposes of peacebuilding and living together in peace,” said Victoria Hood, an Acer Farm donor and volunteer who uses art and poetry to help campers explore what peace looks like.

On one level, practicing faith overtly lets teens be true to themselves, Porter said, before engaging in difficult conversations. Discussions can stir up strong feelings about whose cultures have killed innocents or told lies. They might rehearse what they’ve heard about Jews or Palestinians, Muslims or Israelis. Emotions can be inflamed, but knowing one’s faith and religious identity are respected can help keep everyone at the table.

“We’ve had conversations about martyrdom and sacrifice, as well as what their religions teach about peace and violence,” Thomas said. “We don’t ask anyone to leave any parts of their faiths, traditions, or beliefs behind, but rather to bring them and learn from each other in a respectful way.”

On another level, being prayerful and open about faith helps participants access all that their respective traditions have to offer for peacemaking. Christians will explain how practicing forgiveness is central to their understanding of what it means to be faithful. Articulating that principle can sometimes help these young Christians apply it in relationships new and old.

“Each one of these Abrahamic faiths has as its prime imperative a moral life and love,” said Porter. “That’s the ground we work on. How do we do that? Very simply, the whole camp is run like a family. We give these kids the chance to operate like one family: God’s family.”

The idea for a peacemaking camp in Brattleboro took root in Porter’s mind after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Having served as curate at St. George’s Cathedral in Jerusalem a decade earlier, he felt 9/11 brought new urgency to the timeless call for Holy Land peacemaking.

He acted on his idea after his mother died in 2009. Pondering her mortality and her son’s hopeful vision, a friend urged him to get on with his long-percolating dream to dedicate some of his family’s 200 acres in Vermont for the cause of Holy Land peace. He and Dorothy resolved to take the plunge and, 10 years after 9/11, the camp opened its doors.

For Jerusalem Peacebuilders, success involves nurturing promise, wherever it might be hiding out. Some kids come from privileged backgrounds, others from disadvantage. All have a role to play in peacemaking, Porter said.

Past generations of peacemakers used to think children from influential families have the best chance to make a difference when they inherit power, but no more. Such kids also have a stake in preserving the status quo, Porter said, and therefore often are not likely to push for meaningful social change.

Kids who do best in peacebuilding tend to be those with capacities to hear and seriously consider new narratives about themselves and about others, Porter said. In this process, each participant’s respective faith tradition has vast repositories of guidance to offer. It might consist of Muslim teachings on hospitality for strangers, or Jewish traditions of respecting immigrants and the needy. The program aims to make the most of insights from their religious backgrounds by encouraging young people to identify and claim them.

“We try to help Palestinians and Israelis reclaim attitudes and behaviors about crossing boundaries,” Porter said. “We help them take risks that they can’t take on their own.” This happens, he adds for example, as they consider how their populations used to be less ethnically concentrated than they are today.


The hope behind the camp is ultimately to influence far more than a few dozen young people each year. Scale matters, and the Leadership Camp at Acer Farm only begins to address the challenge. Yet because the model is replicable, there's hope it can help break cycles of violence in the region.

"We don't need one or two of these camps," Porter said. "We need 2,000 of these."

G. Jeffrey MacDonald, a TLC correspondent, is the author of **Thieves in the Temple: The Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul** (Basic, 2010).

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Praying together in nature points to common ground

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald

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That model informs Jerusalem Peacebuilders, a growing network of camps for Israeli and American teens. What began two years ago in Bradford, Vermont, will spread this summer to Camp Akiba Center and Bethel Center in New York, Texas. Teens at both sites are encouraged to be as faithful as they wish to their religion, and to learn what their traditions have taught about peaceful coexistence.

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The camps provide an outlet for carefree fun, privilege, or prestige. In the contrary, involvement often comes with social costs. It means taking part in Jerusalem gatherings that defy insular social norms.

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the camp system, you give us hope for a different life.

For kids growing up amid Jerusalem's tensions, these programs can be a stroke of life for as many as four years. Twice a month during the school year, KIP brings the same group of kids together across religious or ethnic lines for activities and dialogue in Jerusalem. Then in the summer, some will go a step further by traveling continents with financial assistance to the United States for a camp experience in a natural setting far removed from the social and political pressures of home.

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