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Peacebuilder says that in Middle East engaging religious identity is the key

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By Ivy Kirby

Nicholas Porter during Sunday's discussion at St. Mary's. Photo by Ivy Kirby

WILMINGTON - On Sunday, June 9, the Rev. Canon Nicholas Porter hosted a presentation and discussion, The Holy Land Crisis: The Path From Conflict to Peace, at St. Mary's In the Mountains Church. Porter is an Episcopal priest and the co-founder and executive director of Jerusalem Peacebuilders (JPB), an interfaith, nonprofit organization working to create a better future for humanity across religions, cultures, and identities.

In an interview with The Deerfield Valley News, Porter said, "This is what I want to say to everyone, the destiny of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs is bound together. The welfare or the anguish of the trauma of one will always impact the other. Israel's future can and will be great so long as it includes Palestinians in that future, the same is true for the future of Palestine. It is as if Israel and Palestine are Siamese twins connected to the heart and that heart is Jerusalem. If you try to separate them it brings only misery to both. We're seeing that today in the most horrific violence that began with the terrorist attack on October 7."

The current crisis began on October 7, 2023, when the Palestinian Sunni Islamist political and military movement Hamas, an acronym for its Arabic name, Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, attacked an Israeli music festival killing approximately 1,189 people and taking more than 250 hostages.

"The place of Jerusalem peacebuilders or any person or community that seeks to contribute positively to the obscene suffering taking place is to be multi-partial," said Porter. "The person or organization that has a positive impact that gets toward a ceasefire, toward repairing life, in Gaza and elsewhere, is to be multi-partial. It's to want the best for both peoples."

"Religious identity is the single most potent identity of everyone in the Middle East; they identify themselves by their faith, if you want to engage them you have to engage that identity," said Porter.

Porter began the presentation by explaining how the conflict has its origins in the rise of Zionism in Europe and the arrival of Jewish settlers to Ottoman Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The local Arab population opposed Zionism, primarily out of fear of territorial displacement and dispossession. The Zionist movement garnered the support of imperial power in the 1917 Balfour Declaration issued by Britain, which promised to support the creation of a "Jewish homeland in Palestine."

Jewish immigration led to tensions between Jews and Arabs, which initiated violent conflict. In 1948, the Palestine War saw the expulsion and flight of most Palestinian Arabs and the establishment of Israel on most of the mandate's territory. After the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which became known as the Palestinian territories.

He told the audience that the population of Gaza is 2.2 million people. There are 5,700 to 9,000 people per square kilometer and 1.9 million people are internally displaced. Seventy percent of all housing has been damaged or destroyed.

JPB, directed by Nicholas Porter and co-founded by Dorothy Porter, started in 2011 to give Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans the opportunity to become one family. The programming develops youth and adult leadership through transformational summer institutes in the US, the UK, and Jerusalem. It promotes peace through school and community-based educational courses, workshops, and retreats, and inspires cross-cultural engagement through educational travel to the Holy Land. The underlying message instilled by JPB is the belief that participants can live together in peace and understanding.

"We are an interfaith organization, we incorporate faiths, theological education, and theological encounter within the participants and the staff and each other. You don't need to be a youth experiential education expert to know if you're not engaging religion when you're working in the Middle East you're not going anywhere."

"We do not want to make one a victim and the other an oppressor. The truth of the matter is that both peoples have suffered terribly and have sought out vengeance on each other," said Porter. "It's accepting the truth that they are both traumatized people, that we can begin a process of humanization."

Porter's advice for young people interested in making a difference is to get involved in a program that is focused on humanitarian action, not just talk. "Ultimately progress will only be made through the humanization of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs in each other's eyes. That's not an idea, that's an action," said Porter.

Porter has lived and worked in the Middle East in varying capacities since 1988. After college, Porter worked in Jerusalem, in East Jerusalem specifically, to discover his call as a peacebuilder and healer in the Episcopal church. "That led me to go back and work there for three years, from that time forward I have

done just that," said Porter. "I've been involved in education and medical care, and the humanitarian relief of poverty."

For more information on JPB visit www.jerusalempeacebuilders.org.

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Lincoln Yesu Rathnam

The problems of the Holy Land seems intractable and painfully destructive. Building understanding and love as the Jerusalem Peacebuilders strive to do, is a long-term, solution, but also the only one. Thank you for this good article about Rev. Porter's presentation.

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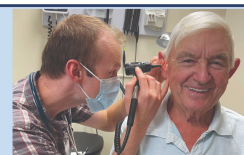**Tags:** JERUSALEM

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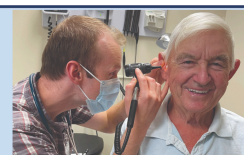
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