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PEACE IN ACTION

Jerusalem Peacebuilders' summer programs for young leaders from the USA, Israel, and Palestine

BY JACK KARN, DIACONAL CANDIDATE

“Good morning campers!” These familiar words resonate with many of us. Whether as fond memories from our childhood or employment as counselors or directors, they are common and mundane words and they wash right over us without a second thought. But in the context of bearing witness to God’s reconciling love at work in the hearts and minds of American, Israeli, and Palestinian youth and adults each summer, those simple words deserve a revisit.

Whether in Vermont, Connecticut, Texas, or even Cambridge, England you will find one of Jerusalem Peacebuilders (JPB) Summer Institutes in operation during the months of July and August. What started in 2011 with eleven teenagers coming together at a small, remote camp property in the Vermont woods has expanded into five intensive, interfaith and peacebuilding programs for 125 promising participants. Combine that with an active portfolio of more than a dozen in-school programs, alumni reunions, and weekend retreats, and you have an impressive approach to grassroots, people-to-people peacebuilding.

The vision for JPB began with its Founders, The Rev. Canon Nicholas and Dorothy Porter, who lived and served in Jerusalem in the 1990s. Having experienced first-hand the violence and intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they were inspired to live out their Christian responsibility and contribute to peace. Where better than to start with youth? And so, their approach to Mideast peacemaking came in the form of offering summer peacebuilding programs for the next generation of young leaders from the USA, Israel, and Palestine.

How do transformation and reconciliation take root? At JPB, they form by creating a community where participants are challenged and empowered through a life-changing program that explores topics of universal importance of what it means to be human and a child of God. In each program, participants engage in a carefully crafted curriculum of workshops, dialogue, religious education, worship, recreation, presentations, and, importantly, fun! Core topics of leadership, identity, communication, peace and conflict, interfaith understanding, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and social justice form the crux of our approach. Our thinking, and what research shows, is that when people are challenged in a safe and supportive environment, they can transform their thinking about themselves and the world, thereby altering the trajectory of their entire lives.

You may be wondering what peace in action really looks like, so let’s zoom into our Leadership Institute in Vermont; our most intensive program for 17-18 year olds. Nearly all of our participants who are

accepted into this program are alumni. With over six months of planning and coordination, the participants will travel nearly 4,000 miles to the program, and they will communicate and express their most personal thoughts and feelings with each other in English which is their 2nd, 3rd, or even 4th language. Jet-lag, nervousness, and excitement are on everyone’s mind as the first day of the program begins. Over the next few days, the teens work together in building a team, navigating a ropes course, discussing why they’ve come to JPB and their hopes and fears, and creating masks which they will paint and dialogue about at the end of the program.

Once a firm foundation of trust and friendship is established, the participants receive amulets that they are required to wear at all times during the program. Then, they begin to unpack their thoughts and feelings about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, followed by a religious weekend of hearing from a visiting imam, rabbi, and priest about the connections between God, peace, service, and forgiveness. Jumah prayer, Shabbat worship, and Holy Eucharist are observed.

During week two of the program, the teens learn from an accomplished actor about ways to use drama for social change and spend five days creating social justice skits that they will perform for local audiences.

A film on the conflict is shown for the participants to discuss and then practice dialogue facilitation skills for use during a public screening. As the program comes to a close, everyone is preparing to go home and take their learning back to their friends, families, and community. They receive diplomas and exchange their amulets for talismans, each uniquely designed by a local artist as a way to remember their sacred time together. Hugs, memorable camp songs, notes of appreciation, and follow-up activities conclude the final hours of the program. Now, the participants must take their learning out into the world and help lead the change: that long and narrow road they are all called to walk.



Having fun during the Crazy Olympics.

I see the miracle of Christ’s healing in the work of JPB. It is an expression of diakonia and an example of how human interaction transforms into peace in action when the Holy Spirit is present. My own experience since joining the organization in 2014 is a testament to this truth. Each year, I am humbled and amazed by the ways our Lord works in my life and the hundreds of lives touched by JPB. At JPB, death and despair do not get the last word for Israelis and Palestinians. Instead, the new life of hope, peace, and reconciliation shine forth through the participants, staff, and supporters of this ministry.

This is why I hold those simple words “good morning campers!” so dear. Like that good morning at the empty tomb in Jerusalem, any day we bring together God’s people for mutual understanding and reconciliation, be they Americans, Israelis, Palestinians, or others, I believe that we can proclaim it to be a good morning.

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