Programming

In 2003, the IEA continued and build upon the momentum it had developed over 2002. No longer a fledgling organization struggling to get itself off the ground, in 2003 the IEA further demonstrated the power and beauty of using interfaith dialogue as a means of building a human peace in the Holy Land. With more confidence in its approach, more experience with its methodology, and more resolve to accomplish its mission, in 2003 the IEA implemented many more programs than it had in 2002: **59 encounters** with nearly **1900 participants**. Encounter by encounter, day by day, and person by person, the IEA is forging a real and active grassroots interfaith movement for peace, justice, and sustainability in the Holy Land and in the Middle East.

In 2003 the IEA also developed a new means of both spreading the beauty of interfaith dialogue to friends and colleagues around the world while simultaneously strengthening the financial support it needs to continue its programs here. With three "Friends of IEA" groups already formed in California, Chicago, and Rome, the spirit and purpose of IEA's mission is spreading across the globe. These partnerships enrich both communities as the IEA is able to give the gift of its experience in interfaith work and thereby enable interreligious understanding. At the same time, the
interreligious study sessions held by these groups abroad fortify the IEA's mission here by both raising much needed funds as well as by reinforcing the spirit of interreligious cooperation globally. It is our deepest hope and prayer that the contagious process of interreligious dialogue – specifically Abrahamic dialogue – not only benefits the host community but further aids and strengthens the work the IEA does in the Holy Land and in the Middle East.

In 2003 the IEA also implemented new programs in the form of two different "days of learning", two sessions of trainings for activists, joint celebrations of religious holydays and a joint visit to holy sites belonging to different traditions around Jerusalem. This was in addition to the now tried and true 46 interreligious study sessions and 6 weekend retreats. The General Program, the Women's Interfaith Encounter (WIE), and the Youth Interfaith Encounter (YIE) implemented around 10 programs each including 4 more Israeli-Palestinian Conferences and 1 Middle East Conference. Through the efforts of all its programming, individually and comprehensively, the IEA is transforming how people here and abroad perceive religion in the Holy Land. No longer viewed as the source of all violence and hatred, the IEA is revealing the true meaning and purpose of religion as a source of harmony, reconciliation, and peace.

❖ General Program – Inner-Israeli & Israeli-Palestinian Circles

Operating in both the Inner-Israeli as well as Israeli-Palestinian circles and accessible to all segments of society, the general program achieved enormous success in 2003: 12 inter-religious study sessions, 4 Israeli-Palestinian conferences, 1 two-day conference, 1 training for activists, 1 day of learning, and 1 joint visit to holy sites.

Inner-Israeli activities:

Eight of the interreligious study sessions were organized by a new ongoing group in Jerusalem called Reut-Sadaqa-Friendship and focused on such themes as
friendship, marriage, divorce, and child-birth in each of the traditions. This group, organized by three women but accessible to all, also took the initiative to implement a new program format by taking a walking tour of some of Jerusalem's holy sites with group members. Another interreligious study session was held by the Interfaith Group for Sufi Studies and focused on the 13th-century Sufi teacher Shihab A-din Suwahardi.

Growing out of the conference "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself" that was held by the IEA in December 2002 in Akko, came the establishment of a new on-going dialogue group in the Galilee. The launching day of learning took place in January at the Sallam School in Majd El Krum with some 60 Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Druze participants. After warm welcome greetings by the Mayor, Mr. Muhammad Kinan, participants were treated to a presentation from Sheikh Muhammad Kiwan, Chair of the IEA, speaking in his home town for which he is the Imam. Sheikh Kiwan spoke about the responsibilities of humans in front of God, which includes peaceful relations with one's neighbors and even animals and plants.

Another shining success came in late June when some 110 people attended the third retreat of interfaith dialogue organized by the IEA and sponsored by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). The theme for this conference was "Extremism and Tolerance" and was approached through the angle of how these two ideas apply to everyday life. The attendance at this conference was noteworthy both for its diversity across levels of religious conviction as well as for the fact that many people came from mainstream society and were experiencing their first encounter with the other. The IEA was particularly pleased and simultaneously saddened that for the first time in its history, the attraction was so high it was necessary to turn some away for lack of space. Amongst those who could attend, many participants conveyed their appreciation for the depth and effectiveness of the experience of encountering the other and their desire to maintain the relations they made.
On the basis of the retreat's participants, the IEA created a new on-going group in the Netanya-Qalansawa area. This group launched its activity in October with more than thirty people from a wide variety of age, religion, religious observance, gender and walks of life and had its second meeting in December. The group enjoys the auspices of the Mayors of Netanya and Qalansawa who also attend its meetings. The IEA is now working to create two further on-going groups in the area: a young-adults' group and a women's group.

**Israeli-Palestinian activities:**

The IEA in conjunction with the Nablus Youth Federation managed to organize four more Israeli-Palestinian conferences in 2003, continuing the momentum established during the two conferences in 2002. All six conferences were made possible through the generous funding of the European Commission. The 2003 conferences focused on the themes "The Righteous Person," "The Pillars of Religion," "The Messiah," and "Reconciliation" respectively. Each conference demonstrated how easy it is for Israelis and Palestinians, from a wide variety of walks of life and of religious and political convictions, to connect together, overcome prejudices and develop trust and friendship. It looks so natural when the IEA and the Nablus Youth Federation get together that it is easy to forget how unique such encounters really are.

The 3rd Israeli-Palestinian conference, held in January, began on somewhat of a tense note as the Palestinian delegation endured many hardships in their journey to join their Israeli counterparts in Jerusalem. Thus it was deeply educating to see that when a political issue came up in the very first session and threatened to explode and dissolve the meeting, the vast majority of the participants, including nearly all the Palestinians, refused to allow it to do so and insisted that the group go back and focus on the seminar's topic. A Jerusalem Post correspondent who attended the conference reported on her experience in the Sunday edition of the newspaper.

Once again, during the 4th Israeli-Palestinian conference, held in March, the Palestinian participants had to go through tremendous effort in order to arrive at the
conference site in Jerusalem some 8 hours after they left home. But once again they insisted on going ahead even when offered to go back home. All the participants, those who had met the other before and those who had not, came to the conference with a great deal of eagerness to get to know the other in a deep way and openness to allow the other to get to know them in similar depth, allowing themselves to overcome their prejudices and fears and to develop mutual respect and trust. But there was something more in this conference; some maturity of the process that made it easier to leave aside political disagreements from the start and dive straight into the actual work of building here and now the nucleus of the future: a humanly peaceful Holy Land.

In the 5th Israeli-Palestinian conference, held in July, the groups gathered together at Neve Shalom to discuss "The Messiah" from the perspectives of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Far away from the hustle of city life and the stress of our daily routines, this small community perched over rolling hills and fields of pastoral beauty truly became an oasis in time and space, enabling and facilitating our process of human encounter. In the closing session each participant spoke on what they would take home with them and many people held back tears as they shared and listened to the emotions expressed around the room. One Palestinian noted that for the first time he would see even the Israeli soldiers at the checkpoints as real people no different than those he had met over the weekend. An Israeli addressed the Palestinians directly wishing them the "real lives of happiness that you deserve" in spite of the hardships they endure. An Israeli woman expressed her deep desire that the next meeting could be held in Nablus and many people agreed, already looking forward to the next opportunity to meet.

In the 6th Israeli-Palestinian conference, held in October, we were reminded that not only "big" issues but also simple groups' dynamics could be a challenge. However, despite the fact that the interaction of the two full groups was less successful than usual, many sub-groups formed during the conference – either the planned small groups or groups formed spontaneously or at the initiative of participants - that reached meaningful depths and created wonderfully positive interaction between those who took part in them, making also this conference to be an important step forward.
Middle East region activities:

Under the auspices of the Middle East region of URI and together with its colleagues in Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, the IEA organized a Middle East Conference in Amman in September, with some 45 participants: Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze; coming from 7 Middle East countries - Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Tunisia and Turkey - with several guests from Germany, Holland, Japan and Spain. The first part of the conference was dedicated to four sessions, each focusing on a different religious viewpoint – starting with a short presentation of the basics of that Jewish/Muslim/Druze/Christian approach, followed by a longer conversation in the discussion groups about those basics and the way they are understood and practiced. After we felt that the interaction between the participants is positive and strong, we moved the second part in which we planned the expansion in quantity and quality of interfaith dialogue and peace-making in the region with concrete plans for implementation in the near future.

Women's Interfaith Encounter (WIE) – Inner-Israeli Circle

In 2003, the WIE organized 16 inter-religious study sessions, 1 two-day retreat, 1 day of training, a Ramadan celebration and 1 day of learning. The program's success has attracted such a large membership that it has created three ongoing groups – one in Jerusalem and two in the Northern region. Some of the themes addressed in interreligious study sessions conducted in 2003 included: mourning practices, concepts and laws of purity concerning women, the status of women in the Druze community, a walking tour of a Druze village, and stories of inspiring religious women. The day of learning focused on the theme "How Religion Gives Strength to Women."

Additionally, a group of 18 women – Jewish, Christian, and Muslim – ranging in ages from 1 - 63 – left behind the tensions and travails of Jerusalem for a two day retreat. Jewish and Muslim prayers for travelers were recited for a safe and relaxing journey together. The group proceeded to Givat Haviva – a lovely rural kibbutz-like setting which houses the Jewish Arab Center for Peace. All were cheered by the one year old daughter of one of the women who wandered around the center of their circles with her infectious smile and gentle energy. The group acknowledged that she...
represented the future and was the symbol of all of their hopes for their children to live together in peace and have a brighter future. At the end they formed a circle and offered words that expressed their reactions and feelings – and the most common was "love" and "more". Later comments included "I never thought that I would be spending two days with these women and losing track of who was Jewish, Christian or Muslim". "I feel hopeful knowing that we can feel like sisters together – and the young women are my daughters." "I was inspired to watch my Muslim roommate bathing and preparing for her prayers and seeing her on her carpet - I saw the beauty of Islam."

Youth Interfaith Encounter (YIE) – Inner-Israeli Circle

In 2003, the YIE really took off with its first **ongoing group** in Jerusalem and another **four-part series of inter-religious study sessions**, this time in Tel Aviv. The sessions were conducted in the form of joint group study of a subject from different religious perspectives – through its canonic texts and led by a senior religious teacher of that religion. The theme of the first series, once again, was "Post Mortem: Life After Life" and each session featured the perspective of one of the four traditions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Baha'i. Following each presentation, participants engaged in joint discussion of the material in both an intra-religious context – how the religion varies within itself on the subject – and inter-religious context – the similarities and differences between the religions. Born out of the success of the series, the plan is to create, early in 2004, an on-going group for in-depth joint study of different religious texts similar to the one established in Jerusalem.

The ongoing group in Jerusalem is comprised mostly of university students who came together to form a kind of "Beit Midrash," or house of study, where they could participate in joint study of religious issues from within and across the major monotheistic traditions. In **10 interreligious study sessions** they have addressed issues including: stories of creation; Maimonides; the prophets; inheritance laws for women; stories about Abraham, the common father; stories about the "first family" including Hagar, Sara, Isaac, and Ishmael; and the near-sacrifice of Ishmael/Isaac. All members of the group revel in the free-flowing and engaging conversation that invariably results from their text studies.
Support

The IEA would not have been able to continue to achieve such progress in 2003 were it not for the generous financial support and gifts in kind of many friends around the world. When the IEA first approached many of these friends, we had only just begun to realize the potential of our vision. It took confidence in our ability to realize this potential fully to continue to donate to our activities and development. Yet many of our friends did have the trust in our vision and continued to support us as we strove to realize it throughout 2002 and 2003. We are deeply grateful to those friends for their support, no matter how large or small, and hope to continue to rely on it. It is this ongoing support which enables us to continue to build upon and expand our activities as we begin to work for peace, justice, and harmony in the Holy Land and the Middle East. We hope to be able to widen this circle of friends and supporters and thereby expand the scope and reach of our programs and efforts. Every single donation makes a difference and we wish to thank every single one of our friends and supporters – past, present and future – around the world.

In particular we wish to thank:

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  - The United States Institute of Peace
  - The Rissho kosei-kai Fund for Peace
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