The Interfaith Encounter Association is dedicated to promoting peace in the Middle East through interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural study. We believe that, rather than being a cause of the problem, religion can and should be a source of the solution for conflicts that exist in the region and beyond.

2014 ANNUAL REPORT
**Activity Report:**

This year in 2014, we are continued enduring our efforts to build peace in the Holy Land by bringing more people together from both Israel and the West Bank through faith based dialogue. This year, IEA managed to facilitate 249 encounters and events. 107 of these encounters involved youth groups, ranging from school-aged children to university students. 21 of the encounters were women’s interfaith encounters, including the launch of Medical Students Interfaith Encounter group.

The Non-violent Communication group was tallied with the most encounters out of any other interfaith group for the year and we also managed to put together a yoga and course of “The Art of Living” retreat for a weekend, with Israelis, Palestinians, friends from Uzbekistan, US, France and Denmark. There was also Mindfulness training, consisting of some twenty people –Jews, Muslims and Christians– who came in March, to the Swedish Theological Institute for training in the Thich Nhat Hanh Tradition. The training was led by Sister Pine, Sister Peace and Sister Luc Nghiem, who came from Plum Village to support people who are involved with grassroots peace building.

We still held activities in the time of the fighting this year – regular encounters and special events. In July we held a joint Iftar, a dinner encounter of jointly breaking the Muslim Ramadan fast and the Jewish fast of 17 Tamuz. Dozens of people joined us – mostly Jews and Muslims and also Christians. This year we all felt that the Iftar had additional significance. It was held while war activities were going on around the country and it took determination to hold it in spite of the mere fear and the frustration due to the circumstances. Another group of the IEA that continued to meet despite the challenges of the "situation", as well as despite the challenges to get away from family during the month of Ramadan, is our group of Rabbis and Sheikhs.

Reut-Sadaqa Interfaith group held an encounter during the last weeks of the war. The topic of the August meeting was War and Peace in different religious traditions. Against the background of the war, it was not an easy encounter but people were very open, had prepared texts and poems, even those who could not come. We talked of different kinds of war, defensive wars vs. wars for economic gain, as well as just wars and unjust wars and the almost unbearable sufferings in any war including the recent one.

The Arabic Speaking Interfaith group also held an encounter during and toward the end of Ramadan and Eid el-Fitr, when the quiet returned to Southern Israel and the Gaza strip. Here are some more interfaith groups who met during the conflict:

A Letter from the Executive Director:

Dear friends,

2014 was not only another year of growth and expansion at the IEA, but also for consolidating and strengthening our existing groups as well. 9 new groups were born, while 60 pre-existing groups continued to develop and exemplify positive cross-cultural interaction, accounting for a total of 249 overwhelmingly successful encounters and events. Many of these encounters took place during the tense times of the abduction and murder of the four teens and the following months of fighting in Gaza. Every such encounter was a statement that we will continue our work until inter-communal peace prevails!

Throughout the course of the year, well over 4,000 people from all varieties of religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds converged to participate and lead in each of our innovative, bridge-building initiatives. Our boundaries continued to grow geographically too; with successful encounters being held throughout the Holy Land, on both sides of the Green Line, and beyond.

Personally, among our proudest accomplishments in 2014 was the continued development of our youth programs, new and old. Together with the invaluable help of our many donors and supporters, we have furthered the planting of seeds in the most delicate, crucial and influential section of the garden of peace: our children.

Along these lines, numerous encounters, retreats, and meetings were organized in which young people from all walks of life were presented with precious and rare opportunities to learn about and experience each other, while developing skills in such areas as cross-cultural linguistics and non-violent communication.

Similarly, we also held many encounters for women, educators, healthcare professionals, religious leaders, medical students and more.

Ultimately, the various invaluable and innumerable programs which we held, as detailed in the following pages, are but a snippet of what has been built and continues to be built here at IEA.

Friends, our programs are ever-growing strands of trees in what will eventually be the forest of peace and co-existence in the Holy Land.
Midwives, Jerusalem-Hebron (young adults), South of Hebron (young adults), Jerusalem-Bethlehem (young women), Circle of Light & Hope, Haifa, Jerusalem-Yata (young adults), Nablus Area (young adults), and Yellin College.

A special occasion was when IEA got recognition by the tax authorities as a public institute for tax-deductible donations.

This year also saw deep mourning, IEA was in a state of shock by the sudden and untimely death of our beloved colleague Leah Lublin of blessed memory. Leah first met the “other” in an IEA program in 2002 and quickly became very engaged with it, the other, and activities of building peace and reconciliation between Jews, Muslims and Christians of the Holy Land. With her kind and gentle dedication, Leah managed in February 2008 to form IEA’s first group of settlers and Palestinians in her town of Ma’aleh Adumin together with partners from nearby Abu dis and Azariya, we will never forget her!

General Program:

In addition to the new groups and the most popular out of all, Philosophy Interfaith Encounter group was launched and is also IEA’s 61st group (just keeping track!). The group for joint study of classical texts began its activity on a Thursday in February, in the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem. Yehuda introduced briefly the IEA to the new participants, who then shared their vision for the group. We were very excited of what is to come of this group through future encounters.

The launch of the Yellin College Youth Interfaith Encounter group took place in March. There were students from the three religions, as well as friends they had that were interested. We talked about religion, customs etc. without mixing politics.

The Nablus Area group launched as well. We began by getting to know each other and it was wonderful to see how the conversation flew and developed. It was especially beautiful to see people staying after the encounter “officially” ended just to speak with one another.

The East and West interfaith group launched, it is an interfaith group of young women. The first encounter was fruitful and happy. We were happy discuss the nature of expected encounters, meeting’s language, and thought of ways to invite more people into the group.

(Letter from the Executive Director continued):

The Incredible strides we have made, and continue to make, are not to be found in any other similar initiative because, simply put, there are no others like us.

Although we would welcome happily the emergence of other organizations with similar techniques and methods, we are proud and grateful for our uniqueness and ability to thrive through the continued support of caring individuals, families, institutions, and communities like you.

With your continued generosity, we look forward to growing even more in 2015, where we will progress even further down the road towards significant social and civic improvements in the climate of the Holy Land. Together, we can and will build the future that all of us, regardless of faith, color, or creed, deserve.

We invite you to join our community by making a tax-deductible donation either online, at http://interfaithencounter.wordpress.com/donate/, or via mail to our U.S.-based affiliate, Friends of IEA, a tax-exempt charity under section 501(c)3 of the IRS code. Mail-in donations may be sent at any time to Friends of Interfaith Encounter Association, 832 Lathrop Ave., Forest Park, IL, 60130-2039. You are also more than welcome to join us at any of the many fun and engaging fundraising events which we will hold this year, as a donor and/or a volunteer. For more information concerning these events, please contact Bob Halim Johnson at halim@interfaith-encounter.org.

Finally, we welcome and look forward to maintaining ongoing contact with you as we continue our work in the coming year. You may find our contact information at the end of this report and we welcome all kinds of feedback and ideas.

With inexpressible gratitude,

Yehuda Stolov, PhD
Executive Director
Interfaith Encounter Association
A third group formed at Yellin College, called College Break’s group, literally a group that meets during the break. This is a really amazing accomplishment because there are already two groups at the college, but then more people wanted to participate, so then extra people formed a new group, regardless of how much time they had. It is hard to create something lasting when we meet only in the breaks and only for a short time, but to see the willingness of people wanting to start the group regardless of the challenges is so special.

At the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, we launched a special and prestigious program in cooperation with IDC’s Student Union and in the framework of a Tempus Project. It wasn’t less than a spectacular success.

Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue:

In March, the Visits Interfaith group had an encounter that was dedicated to the international day for the elimination of racial discrimination. We were seven Israelis and eight Palestinians with a majority of women (with five men). A very interesting conversation developed, reaching the conclusion that the religions are not racist but tolerant and respectful. Racism comes from humans due to political reasons. Religions do not encourage racism but politics does.

Following the sudden death of the late Leah Lublin, who established and coordinated the Abu Dis and Maaleh Adumim, the group was determined to continue Leah's legacy and reorganized to continue regular encounters, having 8 of them during the year. Furthermore, the group agreed to rename itself after Leah with the acronym of LIFE, standing for Leah’s InterFaith Encounter.

SUPPORT:

The IEA would not have been able to achieve such progress in 2014 were it not for the generous financial support and gifts-in-kind of many friends around the world. We are deeply grateful to those friends for their contributions, no matter how large or small. In particular we wish to thank:

Our Donors ($500+):
- Fetzer Institute
- Church of Sweden
- Joseph and Harvey Meyerhof Family Charitable Funds
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Our Sponsors ($150-$499):
- Frida Fruman
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- Carolyn Gifford
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- Kathleen Gunn
- James Tamura
- Lucia Sommers

Gifts-in-Kind:
- The Swedish Theological Institute
- The Austrian Hospice
- Bob Halim Johnson
- Jill Bratt
- Jonathan Wolf

Every bit counts!
$30 – covers printing & communication costs for one encounter
$100 – pays for transportation for Palestinian youth to come to Israel for an encounter session
$250 – allows us to retain trained coordinators for one encounter session
$500 – covers all the costs for one Palestinian and Israeli Youth Encounter
$1,000 – pays for one retreat
$5,000 – can sustain one encounter group for a year
Women’s Interfaith Encounters (WIE):

In 2014, women’s interfaith groups continued to meet throughout the Holy Land. There were four active groups and in all, they had 21 encounters tallied. The Haifa WIE continued to meet regularly, having no less than 12 encounters during the year. The Jerusalem WIE had four encounters and the new group of young women reading literary texts was formed. Another women’s encounter group, IEA’s Midwives for Peace held some really good encounters. During one of them, we had an open, honest, and painful conversation about the war in Gaza, about our feelings, hopes, frustrations and heartaches.

We exchanged our fears, daily difficulties and hopes nevertheless and that brought our group even closer. We also had a fruitful discussion about fasting, the coming Tisha Beav for the Jewish tradition and the Ramadan for the Muslim tradition. As some of our members at that time became grandmothers, we exchange our experiences, photos and happiness with our grandchildren. They all looked lovely, sweet, smiling and enjoying life.

Youth Interfaith Encounters (YIE):

The IEA’s Youth Interfaith Encounter programs had yet another successful year! There were 6 new youth interfaith encounter groups established; Nablus Area group, Interdisciplinary Center group, Philosophy group, Yellin College group and Yellin College Break group, and the Medical Students group. There were 17 youth interfaith groups in all, and holding 107 encounters for the year. That means there were 11 youth interfaith groups continuing to meet together for the year of 2014.

Mt. Scopus Youth Interfaith group had a few touching encounters by taking field trips to various hospitals with students of all religions taking part. We started in Augusta Victoria Hospital. Then we went to Al-Mutla Hospital where we were taken to the third floor, to the department of children with cancer. We went to each of the rooms and handed flowers to the patients, telling them about our organization - The IEA. Later, we went to Hadassah Hospital on Mt. Scopus, where we also went to the children department and gave more flowers to patients. These trips were really special because many people who were there joined us to visit the sick.

Sakhnin College group held a memorable encounter where everyone had a lot of laughs with the activity we put together. The coordinators came up with an acquaintance activity, using a printed clock with 12 hours on it. Each student determines dates with twelve other students, and then we started “dating” each date, focusing on another issue and with another date. The issues were simple questions like, “who am I?” and “where do I come from?” The funny thing was during the activity, the students saw how much fun and joy were present in the room, and they laughed at the fact that they were “dating”.

They were all enthusiastic to meet students they did not know and we could see they wanted to continue. This encounter was worth more than a thousand words. Giving the opportunity for all walks of life, especially the youth, to come together to discuss faith, overcome prejudice and make lasting connections, is so special to see throughout the Holy Land and hope to continue this journey through more success to come.
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“Lighting a candle in this darkness is always better than condemning the darkness.”
Anonymous Participant at an IEA Encounter

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The Secret of our Success:
Unlike most other dialogue organizations, we work with, rather than around, the deep cultural roots, beliefs, and traditions of the peoples of the Middle East. Each encounter is centered on a religious theme and features a carefully planned program of joint study and dialogue. The group then coalesces into a single community that respects the unique identity of each of its “sub-communities” and participants, which helps create a long-term process of grassroots peace-building. By constructively engaging core religious and cultural values, while initially discouraging political conversations that may close off constructive dialogue, our approach successfully involves social and political groups that may feel very uncomfortable with other approaches.