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.

2016 ANNUAL REPORT
Activity Report

2016 marked another busy year for IEA. In our pursuit of long-lasting, sustainable peace between the different cultures and religions in the Holy Land, we continued to work tirelessly to create a better future for the populations of the region. The organization was involved in numerous events ranging from a round-table discussion with religious leaders at the Knesset to a special workshop by Mehdi, a Spiritual Psychology graduate from University of Santa Monica. Moreover, a new type of activity was introduced in May. Namely, IEA carried out its first ever trip in Israel as a bus full of young families and children headed to Herzliya beach, Haifa’s famous Baha’i Gardens, and, finally, Akko. A month later, a second tour was arranged in hopes of making such outings a regular event.

In early June, Dr. Yehuda Stolov and Mr. Rahhal Rahhal paid a one-week visit to the United States. The two proudly represented IEA in New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles, participating in concerts, festivals and other happenings. Thereafter, one of the most exciting and remarkable events of the year took place on 28 September, when over a hundred participants gathered to celebrate the first ever Day of Interfaith Encounter at the Finnish Center of Jerusalem. The beginning of the get-together was spent catching up with friends and enjoying drinks and pastries, after which Dr. Yehuda Stolov welcomed the crowd and spoke briefly about IEA’s achievements during the year. The conversation then went on in small groups until a light supper wrapped up the meeting. The day was a success and we definitely hope to organize it again next year!

The largest event we joined was a concert on 28 December that we co-sponsored together with other NGOs and activist groups. That Wednesday evening, the International Choir for Peace, composed of 130 talented musicians from several different countries, performed in front of an audience of nearly 600 spectators. The concert was wonderful and will undoubtedly be remembered for a long period of time!

Rather than the aforementioned special events, however, IEA’s main focus continues to the ongoing action of its, at the current, 83 groups.

A Letter from the Executive Director

Dear friends,

in 2016 we managed both to consolidate and strengthen our already existing groups and to create a number of new ones. Through our well over 200 successful encounters and various events and more than 80, IEA continued to develop, expand and work hard. During the course of the year, thousands of participants representing a wide range of viewpoints, social status, religions, and cultures joined our inter-communal bridge-building activities and so helped create an even better foundation for sustainable peace in the Holy Land in the future.

One of our most significant successes of the year 2016 was the
In 2016, ten of these groups were youth groups while four of them were women’s groups. Over the year, IEA managed to facilitate a total of 233 encounters and events and experienced, once again, a significant growth compared with the year before. An estimated 4,000 participants were involved in the encounters of 2016. As our organizational performance is highly dependent on the active participation of the groups and their members, this figure is certainly something to be proud of.

This year, similarly to the previous ones, saw the emergence of various new groups in different locations. To begin with, the second Jerusalem-Yata group was launched in late June as the 78th IEA group. During its first encounter, Jewish students from Othniel Yeshiva and young Palestinians from Yata discussed, for example, the recently celebrated month of Ramadan. The youngsters left the encounter excited about the future and went on to hold three more encounters over the year. Another group in the region was established in December, when the Jerusalem Area IE group held its first two encounters. The first one brought together eight Muslims and Jews and, by the second encounter a couple of weeks later, the group had grown to consist of 15 enthusiastic participants. Many of them expressed their desire to join more encounters and, to facilitate the future activities of the group, Jewish and Muslim coordinators were appointed.

The establishment of new groups was not limited to Jerusalem. Namely, the Husan-Otniel YIE group and Tira-Petach Tikva group for teens were founded during the course of 2016. The emergence of the latter, in particular, was of great importance. While the previously founded youth groups mostly involved young adults in their 20s, there was now one more group designed specifically for teenagers. We are very pleased by this development as, in order to successfully build bridges between different communities, it is crucial to incorporate all age groups.

As for women’s IE groups, a new one - Yeruham-Rahma WIE - was launched in the Negev on 1 May. A number of Jewish and Bedouin women gathered together and, after a short introductory round, discovered many surprising similarities between the participants! This was definitely an ideal start for building further positive relationships and the group agreed to pursue this by taking turns in hosting dinners at the members’ homes. The women listed as their objectives establishing and enhancing friendships between Jews and Bedouins and breaking any...
persisting stereotypes the two communities may hold of one another - goals that they will eagerly continue to work on in 2017 as well.

The title of the possibly most successful new group of the year, however, goes to the Faith in Music interfaith encounter group. Its first encounter, held in February, brought together close to twenty aspiring musicians from both West- and East-Jerusalem, after which eight more encounters took place. The young Jews and Muslims enjoyed various workshops organized by professionals and learned a great deal about, for example, different instruments and techniques, improvisation and dealing with stage fright. Most importantly, they discovered that activities related to music are not restricted by language - it is possible to play, sing and have a good time together with another person without knowing a single word of their mother tongue.

General program

In addition to the new groups mentioned above, most of the older ones had a successful year as well. The Future & Hope group held an impressive total of 14 encounters and spent a lot of time practicing Arabic, cooking and simply hanging out enjoying each other’s company. LIFE (Leah’s InterFaith Encounter) met six times and discussed a variety of topics, such as education, holy cities and the tradition of fasting in Islam and Judaism. One of its most memorable encounters this year was held on 15 December, when the group decided to take a step further in enhancing and deepening the existing relationships between the Jewish and Muslim members.

Namely, the group addressed a more personal topic of family by bringing in the members’ offspring! A 13-year-old Palestinian boy from near Azarya, for instance, introduced himself to the group and talked about his free-time activities, such as watching movies and spending time with his friends. Similarly, a Jewish girl of the same age from Maaleh Adumim told the group about her life.

Together we will keep striving for a better and more peaceful future for people of all ages, genders, colors and faiths and we are convinced that, with the support of our partners, it is all possible.

We invite you to join our community by making a tax deductible donation either online, at http://interfaith-encounter.org/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
Our Non-Violent Communication Group held a two-week session on peaceful means of interaction in March. The event was of a multi-cultural nature as it involved Israeli, Palestinian and international students taught by teachers from a variety of different countries, such as Brazil and Slovenia. In addition, the NVC group organized two language exchange weekends to teach its Israeli members Arabic and the Palestinians Hebrew. The participants were convinced that learning the mother tongue of ‘the other’ would provide them an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the foreign culture and so increase trust between the communities.

The Reut-Sadaqa group had an active year as well. During its eight encounters the members discussed, among other subjects, the idea of being a good neighbor in different traditions and the concept of beauty. The group’s encounter on 15 February, in particular, was a great success as the members enjoyed an intense, well-informed and wide-ranging discussion on the position of women in various spiritual traditions. The Jerusalem-based group of Arabic speakers got together five times and spoke of the renewal of the Arabic language and the renovation of dictionaries, different educational systems and importance of reading books, to mention a few topics.

**Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue**

In 2016, IEA held on to its tradition of celebrating Jewish and Islamic holidays together - joint festivities being both an effective and fun way to strengthen intercultural relationships! On 4 July, nearly 50 participants gathered for an Iftar dinner on a rooftop in the Old City of Jerusalem. People from various different traditions, even a few ultra-Orthodox, arrived to enjoy the meal and, afterwards, a discussion on positive encounter experiences and the possibilities for a peaceful co-existence of different faith systems in the Holy Land. Similarly, Hanukkah was celebrated by some twenty IEA activists in late December. The group discussed the background, rules and customs of

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**SUPPORT**

The IEA would not have been able to achieve such progress in 2016 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 the following donors:

$2000+
- Church of Sweden
- Joseph and Harvey Meyerhof Family Charitable Funds
- Azrieli Foundation
- Big Shopping Centers
- EuroMed Program
- Bob Carroll & Ruthie Levi
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- Sally Gottesman
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- Carolyn Gifford
the holiday and wrapped up the conversation with plenty of doughnuts, a traditional Hanukkah snack.

As for the groups working on the interaction between Israelis and Palestinians, we were delighted to witness the growth of our Hebron group since its formation last year. In 2016, its members gathered six times to promote peaceful co-existence between the Muslims and Jews of the divided city. As the name of city in both Arabic and Hebrew is derived from the word ‘friend’, the ultimate goal continued to be building a model of friendship in the southern West Bank - something for other multicultural communities to use as an example. This, according to the group, can be achieved through the means of economic cooperation and effective bottom-up bridge-building. The South of Hebron and Jerusalem-Hebron Religious Leaders groups, too, continued their operations to advance the cause. Overall, 2016 was a successful year and this encourages us to further expand our activities in order to better facilitate inter-religious and cultural understanding between the Jewish and Muslim populations of Israel.

Women’s Interfaith Encounter (WIE)

When it comes to women’s groups, the Haifa WIE was the most active one with its eight encounters during the course of the year. The group visited the City Museum and enjoyed a festive meal and drinks for New Year’s, among other activities. The Yeruham-Rahme WIE, founded in May, organized joint dinners and talked about Hanukkah, Ramadan, the Syrian conflict and religious holidays. In Jerusalem, the local women’s group gathered on 5 December to catch up after a lengthy break and to discuss the role of women in scientific studies and technical professions in different societies. The Jerusalem WIE continues to meet, more or less often, after over 15 years of activity and is looking forward to more encounters in the future.

(Support continued)

Gifts in Kind
- FELM Center
- The Swedish Theological Institute
- The Austrian Hospice
- Bob Halim Johnson

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
Our youth groups continued to thrive in 2016. The most active of them, the Tel Aviv University YIE, got together as many as 20 times, mainly focusing on the topic of charity from the perspective of different religions. The members also discussed a few other issues, including jihad and war in Islamic and Jewish texts. The Model UN YIE organized four encounters, one of them being the Tayibe conference of 26 May. That day, students from Petah Tikva cooperated with their Palestinian counterparts in order to come up with solutions to various issues, such as terrorist access to weapons. An agreement signed by both Jews and Muslims was finally reached, which served as a useful lesson on the importance of partnership between different communities when tackling global problems at an international level. On 20 November, IEA co-hosted a Model UN debate under the Debate for Peace program, bringing together 80 Jews and Muslims from all over Israel. The youngsters spent a full day together debating and negotiating different topics. Afterwards, the event received amazing feedback - the participants learned a great deal of new things and made plenty of friends!

Moreover, the Language Exchange Hebrew University YIE continued its frequent encounters from last year and got together a total of ten times. The Jerusalem-Hebron group met several times as well and discussed a range of topics, such as fasting and acceptance for other religions. The two Jerusalem-Yata groups continued their activities, too. Group 1 met twice, engaging with customs of different religions and respecting the elderly, while Group 2, launched in June, gathered four times to discuss Islamic, Jewish and Christian traditions, purity and other topics. In conclusion, our youth groups continued to build bridges between different communities and are excited about further encounters in the future!
"Lighting a candle in this darkness is always better than condemning the darkness."

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 focused 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.

CONTACT US!

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