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.
ACTIVITY REPORT
In 2017, the Interfaith Encounter Association continued to effectively build bridges for peaceful coexistence in the Holy Land and to expand its the scope of its activities. Despite the challenges of the year, the IEA facilitated a record number of 328 interfaith encounters. There was significant growth of the groups as well: over 90 groups were active. More than 4000 people took part.

A Letter from the Executive Director:

Dear friends,

In 2017 we consolidated and strengthened our existing groups and launched a number of new ones. We hosted well over 300 encounters and various events and had more than 90 groups. Thousands of participants representing a wide range of ages, viewpoints, social status, religions, and cultures joined our bridge-building encounters. Faith in Music, our second group for teens, was launched following the fruitful Model UN group last year.

We are pleased with these developments and wish to expand our work with the region's youth in upcoming years! The encounters continue to provide participants with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with different cultures, faith systems and languages and to challenge prevailing stereotypes about the other.

The numerous groups and activities, detailed in this report, only scratch the surface of our determined and tireless work to create a foundation for sustainable peace in the Holy Land. Behind the scenes, there is a lot of planning and paperwork, phone calls and, most importantly, the continuing support of caring individuals, families and communities like you.

GENERAL PROGRAM
Our general program is accessible to all segments of society, regardless of age or gender. Many groups across the country met regularly to connect on a personal level and discuss a wide range of topics of interest.

The general program include groups such as LIFE (Leah's InterFaith Encounter) and the Reut-Sadaqa group, which organized summer visits to two major pilgrimage sites of Judaism and Islam, namely the Western Wall and the Dome of Rock. It was an exceptional occasion for discussing about the historical and religious role of these places. The Jerusalem Arabic speaking group has met without interruption for more than ten years.

The Language Exchange Group discusses topics in Arabic and in Hebrew. Through a session on proverbs they highlighted different social values and habits.

After two and a half years of intense discussions, the group Jews and Christians study the Gospel of Matthew finished its original objective and moved on to study another part of the New Testament. The Rabbis and Sheikhs Group brings our dialogue approach to theological debates. This group held six sessions and in July a new group of rabbis and sheikhs, of the Sharon and the Triangle regions, was launched. Through study-oriented conversations and in a friendly atmosphere the group discussed the significance of the attitude towards Judaism and Islam.

IEA continues its tradition of celebrating Jewish and Muslim holidays and festivals together. The joint annual IEA-Iftar took place at the FELM Centre in Jerusalem. In a comfortable atmosphere over sixty IEA members and guests gathered, shared delicious food, and shared their knowledge and experiences of fasting in the respective faith traditions.
Following the success of the first *Day of the Interfaith Encounter Association* last year, in 2017 nearly 120 veteran and new group members and guests celebrated the Day of the IEA at the Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem. After enjoying conversation and refreshments, participants joined the monthly “Praying Together in Jerusalem” session. Afterwards, Executive Director, Yehuda Stolov, Chair of the Board and two young coordinators summarized the past year’s successes and presented new initiatives.

**ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN DIALOGUE**

IEA also sponsored over 130 Israeli-Palestinian bridge-building encounters. The *Etzion-Hussan Group* renewed its activity in a well-attended encounter of Gush Etzion’s residents and their Palestinian neighbours. The participants were excited to meet each other and agreed about the importance of these encounters for breaking down prejudices. In the Hebron area many groups – veteran and new ones – worked tirelessly spreading a culture of dialogue and increasing the opportunities for people to meet. The revitalized *Jerusalem-Hebron Group* left its mark by cleaning the roads in the Al-Aqsa and Damascus Gate area. This was a very successful project, and everyone had a wonderful time.

2017 was a busy year for the *Jerusalem-Yata Group* whose activities often collaborated with the Youth Program, featuring innovative encounters between students and others from neighbouring Arab and Jewish communities. The *Jerusalem-Bethlehem Group* emphasized the need to reduce hostility and normalize coexistence between people sharing the same Land.

IEA continued to facilitate a process of grassroots peacebuilding into the West Bank, with the emergence or renewal of various groups. The *Jerusalem-Ramallah Group* was launched this year, bringing together a diverse group of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim adults and young people who met eleven times, expressing their desire to live together in peace.

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In 2017, we marked our 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary by launching **our new website**.

[www.interfaith-encounter.org](http://www.interfaith-encounter.org)

Please update your bookmarks!
WOMEN’S INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER (WIE)

Owing to the nature of many cultural or religious practices in the Middle East, women are often times left out of the circle of interfaith dialogue initiatives. Consequently, it is especially important that women have their own space to come together across religious traditions and engage in interfaith peace-building work equally.

The Rahma-Yeruham Women’s Group met throughout the year for the traditional Aasha (public supper). Through conversation and an enjoyable atmosphere, the women discussed Jewish and Bedouin traditions: they all described this encounter as a unique privilege.

The Haifa Women’s Group was one of the most active groups in 2017. They held their traditional encounters for celebrating Christmas and New Year together. They met with the “Ahmadiya Community” in Haifa, to bring people from all religions communities together and to perpetuate the values of peace and love in the Holy Land. Another remarkable achievement of the group was their participation in two events of the “Journey of Peace” in Faradis and in the massive march to the Dead Sea and Jerusalem, a huge event brought together people from all parts of the country.

Midwives for Peace Group organized the first two-day "Breastfeeding Workshop for Palestinian Nurses". Four qualified trainers planned and conducted the workshop in which 14 Palestinian midwives and nurses took part. It was a successful and empowering experience for all. They look forward to hosting a similar workshop in the future.

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.

YOUTH INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER (YIE)

Our youth programs held many exciting activities for new and veteran groups. The Faith in Music special program for Jewish and Arab teens is IEA's second program for teens. Young Jewish and Arab musicians have the opportunity to work on their technic and to learn new rhythms and instruments. Faith in Music organised over twelve workshops with professional musicians from around the world. At the end of the year, IEA organized a benefit
concert at which the students performed with national and international artists in the Harmonia Hall in the centre of Jerusalem.

This concert served as a platform to demonstrate how music can be a common language between different people.

Get Involved

We invite you to join our community by making a tax-deductible donation either online, at
[interfaith-encounter.org/donate](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.

Model UN Group

One of the most committed groups, the Model UN groups arranged an impressive number of 17 activities for Jewish and Arab students, including several diplomatic visits to Tel Aviv. The "Debate for Peace" program brings Jewish and Arab students together to discuss international issues. This year about 150 Jewish, Muslim and Christian students from 15 schools took part in the “Yachad MUN” conference in Modi'in, which focused on women's rights. They travelled to Romania, Belgium and Kosovo where they participated in other MUN conferences. In July they held the final MUN Conference of the school year in Kufr Qara focusing the discussion on religion. The MUN conference in Sakhnin in November already included 250 students from more than 50 schools. In September a new leadership team of the MUN program was launched. For the first-time students from the Druze and the Black Hebrew communities, as well as Palestinian citizens from Nablus, joined the program.

At the university level, the Tel Aviv University Group focused on study of Jewish and Islamic laws and customs.

The Mount Scopus Group dedicated encounters to how relationships between students of the various campuses could be improved in the light of different faith traditions.

The Hartmann-Armenian School Group and the Givat Schmuel - Baqa School Group were launched during the year and held several exciting encounters.

We are immensely proud of the inspiring activities of 2017. We look forward to continued success and to improving and expanding even further!
SPECIAL PROJECTS

IEA cooperated with local NGOs and institutes on a variety of initiatives.

We were one of the organizations involved in the monthly **Praying Together in Jerusalem**. The annual pick event hosted at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. Approximately 170 people gathered for prayer, mutual reflection, and to express their intention to respect and embrace their differences and similarities.

**Circle of Light and Hope** held, beyond their six regular encounters, a two-day retreat in 2017, where they dealt with the issue of tolerance and relations with those who are outside of our circle of believers.

IEA co-organized the **Developing the Kindness Muscle** conference with the founder of the “Life Vest Inside” organization, Orly Wahba. IEA-activists in Shoham organized the **Religion as a Bridge** panel discussion with the participation of various religious leaders.

**Bearer of Peace** joined IEA in 2017. With the slogan “Meeting from both sides of the fence” this initiative encourages awareness about participants’ personal lives and taking responsibility in the peace process through informal conversation and recreational activities.

**Future & Hope** again arranged a traditional olive harvest in Tarkumia, a special occasion for people from Jerusalem and elsewhere to spend enjoyable time helping a family.

**Teaneck, New Jersey Group**
The IEA exported its model to the USA! After a successful visit of two activists to Teaneck, NJ, a group formed and joined our organization -- the first outside the Holy Land. The first encounters were joined by Jewish and Muslim participants. Since then the group has grown and is attracting Christians and other faith community members. This was an important sign of the global potential of our grassroots effort for promoting a culture of peace.

In July, we co-organized **the Jerusalem Conference on Forgiveness** with the International Forgiveness Institute. A good occasion to introduce our work to other peacemakers and to give the floor to some of our participants who shared their stories.

SUPPORT

IEA could not achieve such progress in 2017 were it not for the generous financial support and gifts-in-kind from our many friends around the world. We are deeply grateful for the contributions of the following donors:

**$2000 and up**
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Big Shopping Centers
US Embassy
Bob Carroll & Ruthie Levi
International Association for Religious Freedom
FELM
World Vision
Larry Yudelson

**$500-$1999**
Shita Vekhokhma
Isaaq Yerushalmi
Jerusalem Peacemakers Inc.
Baruch Kadish
David A. & Karen Richards
Sach
Amy Schuman
John Katonah

**$150-$499**
Leslie Aiello
Julie Danan
Elizabeth Traubman
Marianne Vaney
Theodore Lowitz
Terence Miller
Bruce Aft
Brent Widen
Charles Randall Paul
“Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”

Desmond Tutu

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 for a year

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