



אגודת המפגש הבין דתי (ע"ר) جمعية اللقاء بين الديانات
INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER ASSOCIATION

2019 ANNUAL REPORT



OVERVIEW

In 2019, the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) continued to spread hope and build peaceful relations between communities. Our 40 active groups held 384 encounters including over 4000 participations. Some of our most active encounter groups this year were Model UN YIE and the Bearer of Peace Interfaith Encounter Groups. In addition to the groups located in the Holy Land, we spread our message across continents, with one group meeting in Teaneck, NJ and the surprising launch of IEA Kenya. Some of our groups faced difficulties as result of permits not being granted to Palestinian participants from the West Bank to be able to join the encounters in Israeli territory, but participants often made extra efforts to make the encounters possible and maintain the bond between them.

A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear friends,

In 2019, we consolidated and strengthened our existing groups and launched new ones. We hosted almost 400 encounters and various events. Thousands of participants representing a wide range of ages, viewpoints, social statuses, religions, and cultures joined our bridgebuilding encounters.

We are pleased with these developments and wish to expand our work in upcoming years! The encounters continue to provide

GENERAL PROGRAM

Our general program includes participants from a wide range of ages, interests, political and ideological positions. During the encounters, participants discuss their perspectives on different issues and topics of their interests in a friendly, informal and open environment. Some examples are:

The **Nonviolent Communication** group has met regularly and discussed and practiced techniques of nonviolent communication, held retreats and hosted guest lecturers.

IEA's interfaith band, **Wast El-Tarik**, met weekly to rehearse and performed several concerts throughout the year, sharing their songs in Arabic, Hebrew and English.

Leah's InterFaith Encounter (LIFE) had inspiring conversations on contemporary dilemmas faced by peacebuilders in the civil society looking to make a difference, while also learning about each other's religious traditions.

IEA **Sadaaqa-Reut** and **Circle of Light and Hope** Interfaith Encounter Groups brought some very deep interfaith discussions to the English-speaking public. This year, one of Sadaaqa-Reut's members organized a model Passover Seder for its members to understand the different symbolism of the holiday.

We currently have four different groups of **Religious Leaders** who have in-depth discussions on shared theological concerns- in Jerusalem, Lower-Galilee, Sharon-Nablus and South of Jerusalem. The youngest of these, the Tower of David Forum is constituted of senior Rabbis, Sheikhs and Priests, discussing everything from family values to peacebuilding and environmental protection.

The **Jewish-Christian New Testament Study Group** successfully completed the study of the Letter to the Romans, the second book they have completed together. They have since started to study the Gospel of Luke.

The **Listeners of Life Stories** practiced active and empathetic listening by meeting new guests in each session, getting to know how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict touches and shapes personal stories.

participants with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with different cultures, faith systems, and languages 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. With your much-appreciated assistance, together we will grow and continue to work towards our goal – a better and more peaceful future for people of all ages, gender, races, and faiths. We are convinced that, as reality shows, with the support of our partners, it is all possible.

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,

*Dr. Yehuda Stolov,
Executive Director*



In the international level, we had one group meet in **Teaneck, NJ**, and a very successful launch of **IEA Kenya**, which focuses on building peaceful relations between the large Christian and Muslim communities in the country.



ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN DIALOGUE

IEA encourages encounters and dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians as a way of eliminating out-group hostility, misperceptions and stereotypes and as a method of sustainable building of peace. These groups were heavily affected by the difficulty of obtaining permits for Palestinians to enter Israeli territory for the encounters, which started in May 2019. Even so, nearly two dozen groups met throughout the year, including Muslim participants from **Hebron, Yata, Nablus, Ramallah, Husan**, as well as Jewish participants from **Jerusalem, Hebron, Biniamin, Samaria and Etzion** regions. These groups play an important role in a frequently fragile context, by discussing current issues and exchanging experiences.

HOW IT WORKS

The IEA invites people from different traditional and cultural backgrounds and faiths to join our groups. Within the groups, participants have meaningful encounters which bring them closer to each other. Prejudice, hostility, and suspicion are transformed into direct acquaintance, mutual respect, and friendship.

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



WOMEN INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER (WIE)

Women's encounter and their role in peacebuilding is crucial. WIE groups provide a safe space for women to discuss topics directly related to women's challenges in their societies, as well as a gamut of other topics, while developing an intimate bond.

Participants of **Haifa WIE** visited exhibitions together and traveled to Rabin Square in Tel Aviv where a festive rally took place to open the Mother's Tent, which had meetings, talks and discussions that represented women's wish for peace in the Holy Land.

Yeruham-Rahme WIE met regularly to talk about several interreligious and cultural topics, and listen to workshops about different topics related to women's health. Participants frequently bring their small children to these encounters and respect cultural and traditional practices from each side.

Oranit-Kfar Kasem WIE had four encounters where the women shared their visions for the future, values and opinions on the role of women in peacebuilding.

The East and West Jerusalem Reading Group read and discussed different literature pieces, bringing their teachings and discussions to their own real life contexts.

Midwives For Peace also had four encounters. They addressed topics related to their profession, such as the lack of access to basic healthcare for women of less privileged social backgrounds and sexual violence. They also held a conference for Palestinian Midwives and Nurses on the topic "sexual violence, trauma and women health", and of how to identify, care and support sexual abuse survivors while assisting them during childbirth.



SUPPORT

The IEA could not achieve such progress in 2019 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

Church of Sweden
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Bob Carroll & Ruthie Levi
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Karry Roth Memorial Fund
The Ploughshares Trust
John & Doralee Grindler Katonah

YOUTH INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER (YIE)

In order to achieve lasting peace and coexistence, it is essential that positive interactions with the "other" start at a young age. In 2019, we had several groups meeting in educational institutions, as well as independent youth groups. We had 2 active groups at Bar Ilan University: the **Interreligious Dialogue Academic Program**, led by Dr. Ben Mollov in cooperation with the BIU International School, and the **Bar Ilan Students YIE**, with alumni of the course. The students were invited to visit the Presidential Residence of Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, in the context of his project "Israeli Hope".

Mt. Scopus YIE gathered Jewish, Muslim, Druze and Christian students for encounters, shared meals, music and poetry jams.

Model UN YIE, also called Debate for Peace, gathers Jewish and Muslim high-school students for UN Model debates and other very interesting workshops and trips. In 2019, students met ambassadors from several countries, participated in international UN Model simulations, met with U.N. officials at peacekeeping missions, including the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process. In addition, the group regularly volunteered by organizing activities for refugee children in Tel Aviv.

Nursing students at Hadassah Ein Karem Campus attend the weekly encounter dedicated for **Health Equality for All People** in Israel, debating different models of Cultural Competence to be implemented by health care providers, led by a senior professor. In addition, we had YIE groups meeting in Jerusalem, Lower Galilee and several groups of young Israelis and Palestinians, as well as the launch of the new **Haifa YIE**.



GET INVOLVED

We invite you to join our community by making a tax-deductible donation online at 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.



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SPECIAL EVENTS

In March, our Executive Director Dr. Yehuda Stolov participated in the conference on “Freedom of religion or belief, gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals: Enabling positive synergies” at the **United Nations in Geneva Switzerland**. The conference launched a one-year expert consultation process, to which Yehuda Stolov has been appointed to participate. The purpose of the process is to explore the positive synergies, dilemmas and obstacles that may emerge in this relationship, and to discuss and draw up indicative examples of possible future projects showcasing the positive synergies identified.

In June, IEA traditionally held the **Joint IEA-Iftar** at the Felm center in Jerusalem. Around 130 local and international guests had a festive gathering with meal, conversations and music from the Interfaith Encounter Band, with special guest Sheikh Hafiz Abdullah Muhammad from London.

In December, the IEA held its first **Interfaith Singing Evening**, also at the Felm Center, in Jerusalem. It was an inspiring and fun evening, with music from different traditions sung in Arabic, Hebrew, English- and even a little Finnish. Around fifty people joined us to celebrate the upcoming holidays and interfaith friendship through music. The IEA band, Wast Al Tarik, gave us an incredible performance, playing Christmas and Hanukkah songs, as well as traditional Arabic songs and some of their own original repertoire.





This year had many challenges and our growth was slowed down by various problems but thanks to so many caring partners we made a lot of progress! Thanks to all of you who supported us financially as well as participated physically in encounter groups. We look optimistic at the future. We strive for reaching more people in 2020 and we hope that you will continue to partner with us in promoting peace in the Middle East and around the world.



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