2021 was a year of crisis and hope in the Holy Land. The Covid-19 continued to cast a shadow on all in-person gatherings. We had a major disruption in May, with another Israel-Gaza war and serious civilian unrest with several cases of vandalism and lynching with nationalistic motives. And yet we continued to see how our activists worked hard and succeeded in the face of so many challenges.

One of the highlights of the year was seeing groups that had been meeting for some time, discussing the violent events during May. Participants expressed their frustration, and even anger, while being able to listen and empathize with other participants’ pain. That was the culmination of a process of trust building through interfaith encounters, which allowed friendly relationships to be established enough to not only endure the crisis, but face it in a way that brought both sides closer, instead of tearing them apart. That in itself is a living proof of the importance of IEA’s work of 20 years on the ground and its effectiveness.
Dear friends,

2021 was another very challenging year! The Covid-19 pandemic continued to dominate the reality and limit our activity but during the second half of the year we took advantage of periods with reduced morbidity rate and worked to renew activity of groups that could not work during the hard limitations, as well as cautiously renew physical encounters. These immense efforts paid off and 10 groups renewed their activity or started completely new! We also continued to organize this year relatively many public events.

Altogether we held 384 encounters during the year and our group roster reached 116. Thousands of participants representing a wide range of ages, viewpoints, social status, religions, and cultures joined our bridge-building encounters in 2021, finding not only mutual understanding and friendship but also mutual support in front of the pandemic. We are now looking forward to recover the activity of the other groups and continue to grow our activity further.

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 continued support of caring individuals, families and communities like you.

With your much-appreciated assistance, together we will continue to grow and continue to work towards our goal - a better and more peaceful future for people of all ages, genders, races and faiths. We are convinced that, 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,
IEA Executive Director
2021

INTERFAITH ENCOUNTERS

Several of our well-established interfaith encounter groups continued to meet: Reut Sadaqa has been steadily meeting for 19 years straight; Hashfela region gathered to study topics related to ethics and contemporary challenges; and the New Testament Study Group now has both an online and an in-person components that met a total of 15 times throughout the year. The new Young Adults Jerusalem group held 17 encounters, including an interfaith Iftar for 30 young people, as well as several tours and discussions.

Some groups took advantage of the possibility of meeting in person again to start anew, such as the Women’s groups of Arad, Haifa, Yeruham-Rahme organized several activities such as trips and arts activities.

Others decided to continue to meet online throughout the year-including the Circle of Light and Hope, the 929 project Interfaith Encounter Group, and the IEA online group open to people from all over the Holy Land.

Two groups started their activities following the disruptive events of May, with the understanding that interfaith work is more important than ever: Tel Aviv-Jaffa and Husan-Beitar.

The IEA continued to have a strong presence in universities, including Bar Ilan University- with both a weekly course and a students group- and at the Ein Keren Campus of Hebrew University, with the weekly Nursing Students course.
We also had 5 Religious Leaders groups this year, including two in the Galilee, one in the Center region, Jerusalem and Gush Etzion - Betlechem region.

We had 11 Israeli-Palestinian groups meeting in 2021. The Nablus region group held 10 encounters in several different places and brought together their families for special get-togethers; the Bearer of Peace project organized 64 informal encounters of Muslims and Jews in South Hebron Hills throughout the year; and groups in Gush Etzion and Hebron area discussed texts and interfaith topics.

Besides our regular interfaith encounter, several groups chose to incorporate other methods to their encounters: two of them used storytelling methods (Listeners of Life Stories and Jerusalem Storytellers); Yoga Synagogue gathered multicultural participants for Yoga practices several times a week; Debate for Peace organized 27 encounters, including several delegations of Jews and Arabs to join Model UN conferences; and Midwives for Peace discussed matters related to the midwives’ professional and cultural challenges.

In addition, two groups met outside the Holy Land in 2021: DC and beyond met online monthly throughout the year, and the Teaneck, NJ group renewed its activities after a long break, and met twice in person.
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.

GET INVOLVED

There are many ways to be part of our movement for peace:

- Join one of our groups or help us form a new group in your area/university
- Join our listserv and invite others to join
- Be active on our social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube)
- Partner your institution with us
- Make your Amazon shopping through our link
- Make a tax-deductible donation online 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.
SUPPORT

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Throughout 2021, the IEA developed projects and partnerships through its participation in several networks. From January to August, we participated in the Global Education through Digital Stories project, supported by the Anna Lindh Foundation and the EU. We held several online workshops, a week-long course on digital storytelling which resulted in the production of 9 short films, and local social actions. In addition, a special handbook was produced explaining the methodologies used in the different activities developed.

The IEA also participated as one of the organizers in the conference “Shared society in diverse communities and organizations in an era of local and global crises” at Jezreel Valley College. The conference was led by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the Center for the Study of Social Diversity and Conflicts between Groups, in collaboration with the IEA and other organizations.

We also held events of our own: the annual Interfaith Encounter Day was finally held in person again, and we enjoyed the occasion to celebrate IEA’s 20th anniversary! We held conversation circles followed by a light dinner. It was an opportunity for participants and coordinators
to get to know people from groups other than their own, and we already heard of new partnerships fostered during the event. We also helped organize online events to celebrate some major holidays, such as Passover, and Lailat al Kader. The IEA Coordinators Community continued to meet both online and in person, encouraging coordinators to exchange experiences and learn from one another and from our guest speakers.

In December we gathered for our second Interfaith Singing Evening at Felm Center, a magical night of songs in English, Hebrew, Arabic and Finnish.

Looking back

20 YEARS OF PEACE WORK

As the IEA completed 20 years of existence, we look back with awe and gratitude to all our wonderful activists, collaborators and supporters and look forward to having you with us for the next chapters!
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