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PHOTOS:

- 1) Rabbi Fuchs (left) and Pastor Danner in Israel
- 2) FOR THE GROUP PHOTO: Caesarea was a stop on the group tour to Israel planned jointly by Temple Bat Yam and Sanibel Congregational UCC.

Group Trip to Israel joins two Sanibel congregations in friendship and adventure

Earlier this spring, a group of 40 adventurous travelers headed to Israel for a tour presented jointly by Bat Yam Temple of the Islands and Sanibel Congregational United Church of Christ. As it turned out, the group was divided nearly equally between the congregations.

The Rev. Dr. John H. Danner, Senior Pastor of SCUCC, and Rabbi Dr. Stephen Fuchs of Temple Bat Yam both helped plan the ambitious tour itinerary and traveled with the group. Throughout their time in Israel, they offered insights and provided opportunities for discussion.

“Our hope in taking this trip was to help build an even stronger bond between our two congregations, while learning about Israel’s history and current situation,” said Danner. “One of the real delights of the trip was how wonderfully folks interacted with one another.”

Rabbi Fuchs agreed, saying, “I had high expectations for the trip, and the reality of our experience exceeded them. It was a joy to interface with John in leading this tour, and the logistical support of Barry Roth and Alan Lessack were invaluable.”

The tour, which offered guided visits and unparalleled experiences in legendary locales, was the result of many months of collaborative effort. According to Barry Roth, a Bat Yam congregant and tour participant who played a major role in organizing the myriad details, “This trip accomplished several goals, among them a deeper understanding of Judaism and Christianity, a successful accomplishment of an itinerary packed with events from morning through evening, and the wonderful result of meeting many new friends, which I cherish.”

Although most of the travelers went directly from Miami to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv and arrived early on Tuesday, April 30, several made their way via different routes and at different times. On their first evening together, the entire group met for dinner at a restaurant overlooking Jerusalem’s Old City Walls.

The tour proper began the following morning with a visit to excavations of Jerusalem dating back to the time of King David. The group entered the Old City at Zion Gate and explored the ancient Jewish Quarter and the Kotel Tunnels.

The next day’s features included a guided tour of Bethlehem, with the Church of the Nativity. Back in Jerusalem, the group visited Mount of Olives holy sites, including the Garden of Gethsemane and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. On Mount Zion, they saw David’s Tomb and the Last Supper Room. They had free time to wander through the colorful Arab bazaar. That evening, they enjoyed the “Tower of David Night Spectacular” show in the Old City.

On Friday, May 3, guides provided a tour of the Yad VaShem World Holocaust Remembrance Center and a geo-political tour of Jerusalem. The travelers also experienced the colorful open-air marketplace. A highlight was the Kabbalat Shabbat worship at Congregation

Har-El, where Fuchs preached and Danner offered greetings to the congregation. Following the service, they attended a home hospitality “Shabbat of a Lifetime” dinner.

Saturday provided outdoor adventures: a trip to the Judean Desert, with cable cars to the summit of Masada for a tour of Herod’s desert mountaintop fortress. That was followed by an opportunity to float effortlessly in the ultra-salty Dead Sea and relax at a beachfront spa.

On Sunday, after a service at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem’s Old City, the group viewed the Dead Sea Scrolls and much more at the Israel Museum. They then headed to Galilee, stopping on the way at the site of Jesus’ baptism and the location where the Israelites crossed the Jordan River after their 40-year journey from Egypt. They traveled along the Jordan River Valley and viewed the Sea of Galilee and the Mount of Beatitudes. A cruise on the Sea of Galilee concluded with dinner at a waterfront restaurant in Tiberias.

The following day, they explored the historic center of Jewish mysticism in the Galilean highlands, met with a Kabbalistic artist, explored the Golan Heights in an off-road jeep tour, and viewed Israel’s neighbors from the summit of Mt. Ben-Tal.

On their final Tuesday, they enjoyed a walking tour of Nazareth and the Church of the Annunciation. They toured a spice farm in Bethlehem and explored a restored Templar Colony village. They also visited Caesarea, Herod’s Roman amphitheater and grand palace on the beach, as well as Herzlia, Israel’s innovation hub on the Mediterranean Sea.

On May 8, Israeli Memorial Day, they visited a secret underground munitions facility where pioneers who helped establish modern Israel are honored. A cross-cultural encounter with Israel’s Ethiopian community included a cooking workshop and a traditional Ethiopian-style lunch.

That same day, during a visit to Netiv HaAsara on the frontier with Gaza, the group visited with a woman who, as a ceramic artist, has created an interactive peace project on the border wall where rocket attacks regularly occur. In one of his daily blog posts during the trip, Danner wrote that “she has made it her mission to invite thousands of folks to come to the border and use the tiles she has created to make a mosaic mural on the very walls that provide a measure of temporary safety to her community. The wall faces Gaza, and the message she has enabled there in bright, colorful tiles can be seen from ‘the other side.’ Salaam, it reads. Shalom. Peace.”

The last day of the tour, May 9, was Independence Day in Israel. After free time on the Mediterranean coast, the group traveled to Tel Aviv and explored the ancient port city of Jaffa. Before a Yemeni-style closing dinner, they saw an inspiring model for coexistence organized by an Islamic cleric, peace activist, and educator and his Jewish wife. The couple has created an interfaith, multicultural kindergarten called The Orchard of Abraham’s Children.

Danner wrote in his blog that the children are “taught the rudiments of all three of the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Not in order to convert them, but rather to develop...an understanding and appreciation for ‘the other.’ The program has grown to five schools in Jaffa and two in Galilee. They’ve been at it now for well over a decade, and some of their first students are now leaders in the peace and reconciliation movement.... The fruits of their efforts are boys and girls better equipped to move through the world, not in fear, but rather with an appreciation for people of different backgrounds.”

To see Danner's eleven blog posts from the trip, visit PeriwinklePonderings.blogspot.com. For Fuch's commentary and photos, visit FindingOurselvesinBiblicalNarratives.com.

Alan Lessack, who recently retired after two terms as Bat Yam's president, was on the tour with his wife, Edina. He explained that as they planned the trip, he and Pastor Danner, Rabbi Fuchs, and Barry Roth all hoped to maximize coverage of both Jewish and Christian sites. After returning from this memorable visit to Israel, he said, "Based on the feedback from the trip participants, we achieved that goal."

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