

Faiths combine to send Israel a mission of peace

by the Very Reverend Finlay Macdonald

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This weekend I shall join a party of some 30 individuals from seven faith communities on an inter-faith pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine. I have always regarded it as deeply ironic that a land called "holy" should be at the heart of so much conflict. Our hope is that this pilgrimage will be a journey into closer understanding, deepening respect and enduring friendship and that it will contribute in its own small way to the peace for which we all pray.

The idea grew out of a conversation between Ephraim Borowski, director of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, and Rami Ousta, CEO of umbrella group Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland (Bemis). Last autumn, they invited me to join them in helping turn the idea into reality. Five years ago, as Moderator of the General Assembly, I led an inter-faith delegation to the EU in Brussels, which led to the establishment of lasting friendships among Scotland's faith leaders, and was therefore seen as a helpful model for the pilgrimage.

On the planning group, we were joined by Na'eem Raza, president of the Glasgow branch of the Islamic Society of Britain and director of Meem, a Glasgow-based diversity training organisation, and Leah Granat, public affairs officer of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities. Over the past eight months, we have worked together, planning the itinerary and generally promoting the idea in our communities. To our delight, the initiative has proved so popular that demand has exceeded the number of places available. As a result, serious consideration is being given to making this an annual event.

We immediately acknowledged that over the years Scotland has demonstrated a positive example of multiculturalism. Nevertheless we also recognise that ongoing tensions in the Middle East have the capacity to unsettle communities around the world, including our own. Therefore, one aim of the pilgrimage is to build trust between individuals and so help mitigate the knock-on effect of such tensions in Scotland.

The original idea had been to focus on the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, since these are the religions most present in the Holy Land. However, while these three faiths are the most strongly represented in our group, we soon decided to invite other faiths to take part. Our group will now also include members of the Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh religions.

Commenting on the range of faiths, Rami Ousta said: "This unique pilgrimage reflects the commitment and cooperation shared by various Scottish faith groups to promote faith and community cohesion as well as leading by example through proactive initiative rather than reactive role."

Last February, First Minister Alex Salmond declared: "The key role for Scotland, as a small country, will be as a peacemaker - providing the facilities and the opportunity for conflict resolution."

As an aspiration, the First Minister pointed to the example of Norway brokering the Oslo Accords, and the pilgrimage is being undertaken in this spirit.

We shall visit sites holy to Judaism, Christianity and Islam - the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. In Haifa, we shall visit the Baha'i Shrine to reflect that the pilgrimage is about religion rather than politics. At the same time, meetings have been arranged with leading figures in the Palestinian and Israeli communities, both politicians and religious leaders, and visits will be made to a number of coexistence projects to meet with people "on the ground".

Inevitably, there will be differences of perspective within the group but the hope is that these can be talked through in ways that will enable understanding of different points of view. For this reason, time for relaxation has been built into the programme, with a folk night and opportunities for sharing meals and conversation. As might be imagined, the designing of menus has itself presented no small challenge.

The group will be staying at the Church of Scotland's guest house in Jerusalem. This is attached to St Andrew's Church, which was built by Scottish public subscription as a memorial to Scots killed in the First World War. The church and guest house are symbolically placed close to the green line that marks the boundary between Jewish West Jerusalem and Arab East Jerusalem. Time will also be spent in Galilee visiting Christian sites, a Scottish kibbutz on the Golan Heights and a Druze town where we will meet local leaders.

While in Galilee, the group will be based at the Scots Hotel in Tiberias, a Church of Scotland facility with a ministry of hospitality and which seeks to be a centre for dialogue and reconciliation. Na'eem Raza observes: "The pilgrimage is a great opportunity for getting to know each other while we travel and stay together for a week. The location and programme will lend to the dynamics of achieving some of our goals."

The Rt Rev David Lunan, Moderator of the General Assembly, will be taking part, along with Rabbi Moshe Rubin, Sheikh Mohammed Ruzwan, Acharyaji Medini Mishra and the Venerable Kamburawala Rewatha Thero. While unable to come himself, Cardinal Keith O'Brien has expressed his strong support. Thanks to some funding from the Scottish Government and charitable foundations, it has been possible to provide financial assistance to enable a number of younger people to attend. This will add to the diversity of the group and is also a way of building for the future.

- Our group has identified the following aims and outcomes for the pilgrimage.
- To affirm Scotland as a leading country in promoting inter-faith dialogue and understanding.
- To establish friendships among the participants which will lead to greater community cohesion in Scotland.
- To take a lead on policy issues and debate which are of concern to faith groups at local and national levels.
- To share this experience, both locally and nationally, and offer support and advice to promote other bridge-building activities.
- To create a better understanding of faith diversity and the value of enhanced cooperation.

On their return it is intended that members of the group will be able to form small inter-faith teams that will be available to speak to religious and community groups around Scotland and encourage the work of bridge-building.

Ephraim Borowski said: "This is a wonderful example of how a chance remark can lead to something big. With the generous support of the Scottish Government and charities, we have put together a mixed group of faith and community leaders, young and old, men and women.

"We will live and learn together for a week, in order to foster better understanding of each other's faiths. Our hope is that we will be able to be both a living example of coexistence and cooperation for Israelis and Palestinians, and that we will be able to spread that message on our return to Scotland."

Finlay Macdonald is principal clerk of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and was Moderator of the 2002 General Assembly. He is active in inter-faith dialogue and is a founder member of the Scottish Religious Leaders' Meeting.