



# Center for Religious Tolerance

Religion as a Force for Peace

March, 2008

## Palestinian Women's Empowerment Project Up and Running

With the help of *CRT*, an innovative new project in Furedis, Northern Israel, is helping women learn the skills they need to get paying jobs and participate in public life. *Women Reborn: Social Empowerment for Palestinian Women* is directed by Ibtisam Mahameed, an *Abrahamic Reunion* member and *CRT* partner. To date 28 Muslim, Christian and Druze Arab women have applied to participate in the program, which teaches self-esteem, basic literacy, language skills, and vocational skills.

The project is only in its second month, but word is already spreading. Ibtisam was recently invited by SHATIL, Israel's leading capacity building center for social change, to speak about the program, one of the first of its kind in Israel. Plans for year two include admitting another group of women and helping selected participants from year one to start small businesses. In addition, a small group of women leaders will receive intensive training and coaching and will assist in replicating the project in other parts of Israel and Palestine.

One of the first things the women requested was instruction in Hebrew – the national language of Israel. All the women are native Arab speakers, and most picked up only rudimentary Hebrew in school. Speaking fluent Hebrew is critical both to achieving success in Israeli society and to building bridges with Israeli Jews. Additional funds are currently being sought to add a Hebrew instructor to the curriculum.

*Women Reborn* is partially funded through a grant from the J.A. Clark Foundation to SHIN, an Israeli non-profit providing administrative support. *CRT* assisted with program planning and resource development and will be overseeing the evaluation.



Board member Judith Allen with Ibtisam

### Highlights from the Peacemakers

**Sana Albaz**, founder and director of the community youth center in Tel Sheva, was recently selected to light the flame at Mount Hertzal at a celebration of Israel's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Albaz, the wife of AR member Sheikh Khalil Albaz, is the first Bedouin and the first Arab woman to be honored by the State of Israel in this way.



Sana Albaz

**Abrahamic Reunion** held a gathering March 23<sup>rd</sup> at *Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari's* home in the muslim quarter of Jerusalem. In honor of the Jewish holiday Tu B/shavat, teachings about reverence for nature from all the religions were shared.

On March 25<sup>th</sup>, in the face of escalating violence in Sderot, Gaza, and Jerusalem, *CRT* partners **TRUST-Emun** and **Jerusalem Peacemakers** held an open discussion on nonviolence. Fifty Palestinian, Israeli Arabs and Jews attended. According to **Eliyahu McLean**, the event rekindled hope during a difficult period.

## CRT to Coordinate Interfaith Activities at UN Conference

In February, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon kicked off a multi-year global campaign highlighting the importance of women in building a peaceful, just and sustainable future. Mr. Ban noted that weapons of armed conflict too often include rape, sexual violence and conscription of children, and that violence against women impedes economic and social growth. He called for the UN, governments and civil society to work together to end the violence immediately. The campaign will run until 2015, the target year for meeting the internationally agreed upon *Millenium Development Goals*.



*Sophia WWC 2010*

As part of this initiative, a fifth worldwide UN women's conference will be held May 25-29, 2010, in Sophia, Bulgaria (previous sites were Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing), with simultaneous events in all UN regions. Unlike earlier women's conferences, Sophia will focus on mobilizing grassroots organizations, the private sector, and governments towards implementation of existing UN policies concerning women and social development.

CRT's Andy Blanch has been invited to join the *Sophia* planning team to coordinate interfaith, religious outreach, and women's peacemaking aspects of the conference. This will be the first UN women's conference with an explicit strategy for involving religious and interfaith women leaders. Women of faith have long been at the forefront of economic development and peacemaking efforts in conflict zones, and their work is pivotal in achieving the goals of the campaign.

For more information about Sophia see [www.sophia2010.org](http://www.sophia2010.org) and [www.c-r-t.org](http://www.c-r-t.org). If you are interested in getting involved, contact Marion Larsen at [mhlandlbl@msn.com](mailto:mhlandlbl@msn.com).

### In the News

2008 has been proclaimed the *Year of Reconciliation* between Israelis and Palestinians by the *World Congress of Imams and Rabbis for Peace*. All who desire peace are invited to join this action: [www.imamsrabbis.org](http://www.imamsrabbis.org)

*Abrahamic Reunion* member **Rabbi Menachem Froman** continues to negotiate between Hamas and the Israeli government. In February, along with a Hebron-area journalist with close ties to Hamas, Froman presented a proposal for a cease-fire agreement to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and to the government in Gaza.



*Reb Froman*

The *U.S. Agency for International Development* has announced the availability of \$35 million in FY 2008 to fund grants in conflict mitigation and reconciliation. Non-profits and others are encouraged to apply.

## Congressional Breakfast Highlights Peacework

Every year since 1953 a *National Prayer Breakfast* has been held in Washington, D.C., hosted by members of Congress. Four days of workshops, meetings, and receptions precede and follow the Breakfast. This year's event was attended by over 4,000 guests, including dignitaries from 150 countries. CRT's Robin Saenger and Andy Blanch attended as guests of Senator Bill Nelson (FL) and his wife Grace.

The Breakfast showcases the role of religion in addressing social problems. This year's program included a focus on interfaith peacemaking in the Holy Land. Ambassador Tony Hall, former Congressman from Ohio, talked about his recent work with top religious leaders from Israel and Palestine. Andy Blanch spoke at a post-Breakfast gathering about the CRT women's interfaith work in the Middle East. She emphasized the importance of grassroots interfaith activities in creating conditions for sustainable peace.

While the majority of attendees at the weeklong event are Christians, the non-partisan and inclusive atmosphere was "an unexpected surprise." As Robin Saenger noted: "With few exceptions, I found the speakers, presenters, and attendees were focusing on something much larger than politics . . . They didn't see their main focus as saving others (but) were activists, conscious and awake individuals responding to the call of our time and our world."

