



# Center for Religious Tolerance

Religion as a Force for Peace

## A New Generation of Peacemakers

August 2009

CRT peacemakers are looking a lot younger these days. In an effort to bring the message of interfaith reconciliation to a new generation, several youth activities have been launched by CRT and partners over the past few months.

In February, shortly after the war in Gaza ended, *Abrahamic Reunion* members *Jiries Manseur* and *Rabbi Zion Cohen* arranged a meeting of Arab and Jewish students at a high school in Sderot, which borders Gaza. The Arab teens shared their anger and frustration about the bombing of Gaza, while the Sderot teens talked about the terror of never knowing when a Kassam rocket might land. *Abrahamic Reunion* religious leaders led the group in prayers and provided a model for interfaith relationships. The meeting was broadcast on Israeli and Arab TV and was widely viewed within Gaza.



Students Discuss Gaza

In early summer, with funding from the U.S. Embassy, *Elana Rozenman* and *Ibtisam Mahameed* carried out a similar program, called *TeenTalk*. Muslim teenage girls from an Arab village met with Jewish girls at the Congregation Mevashei Derech in Jerusalem. In return the Jewish girls traveled to the Arab village of Fureidis. The girls studied texts from the Koran and the Tanach with a woman rabbi and a sheika, and learned about the role of women in Judaism and Islam. It was the first time that the girls from Jerusalem had ever been in an Arab town.

There is also growing interest in taking a message of coexistence to young people in the U.S. In July, CRT director *Andrea Blanch* served as faculty at a teacher training institute on the Middle East hosted by Yale University. Teachers expressed particular interest in the interfaith peace movement and in the use of media to



AR Members at Student Discussion

engage students. Starting in August, CRT will also be involved in a *Teaching Tolerance* program at Sarasota High School. Using a study circle methodology, high school students will learn about prejudice, intolerance, and conflict management. The program has been developed partly in response to several incidents of racially and religiously motivated violence in Sarasota.

## Ibtisam Receives Honor from Dalai Lama

On April 26<sup>th</sup>, *Ibtisam Mahameed* was honored as an “Unsung Hero of Compassion” by *His Holiness the Dalai Lama*. Ibtisam is a founding member of the *Abrahamic Reunion* and project director of the CRT-supported *Women Reborn* program. As an Arab Muslim living in the Jewish state of Israel, Ibtisam works to challenge the patriarchal traditions of her culture, to overcome the divide between Jews and Arabs,



Dalai Lama & Ibtisam

and to “make peace, one friendship at a time.” Ibtisam was one of 25 women and 24 men from across the globe selected for their compassionate action to receive a blessing from the Dalai Lama at a ceremony in San Francisco. Ibtisam and her husband Soubchi also visited Seattle, WA, where they were hosted by an interfaith peace group organized by CRT board member *Jelilah Judith Allen*.

## CRT Peacemakers on Capitol Hill

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill are getting informed about interfaith peacemaking. Since the election of President Obama in November, several political advocacy efforts have picked up steam, and CRT is playing a key role.

CRT is participating in a new coalition - the *Middle East Project* (MEP) - with a goal of representing religious and interfaith peacemaking on the Hill. In May, CRT director *Andrea Blanch* testified at MEP's kickoff congressional briefing. Three members of Congress participated – *John Conyers* of MI, *Walter Jones* of NC and *Dennis Kucinich* of OH. Former DC Congressman *Walter Fauntroy*, 20-year veteran of Congress who worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr, framed the peace process as a social movement requiring the same kind of time, commitment and social activism as the civil rights movement.

After the hearing Rep. Conyers reported on the meeting to *President Obama* while MEP director *Matt Lakenbach* met with *George Mitchell*, who expressed his commitment to involving civil society and the religious sector in the peace process. According to Lakenbach “Our best hope for peace lies in cooperation between civil society, religious leaders, and government officials.”



CRT Testimony

CRT is also a member of the *Alliance for Middle East Peace* (ALLMEP), a coalition of grassroots peace organizations. Director *Avi Myerstein* states that ALLMEP's priority is the establishment of a \$200 million annual fund for grassroots peace efforts: “We have seen in the past what happens when we ignore the constituents on the ground.” (To find out more: [www.MiddleEastProject.org](http://www.MiddleEastProject.org) & [www.allmep.org](http://www.allmep.org).)



### In the News

The *Abrahamic Reunion* has recently received attention in the international press. A PBS story highlighting the Pope's visit to Israel featured *Elana Rozenman*, *Eliyahu McLean* and *Ibrahim Abu El-Hawa*. A BBC report featured *Rabbi Menachem Froman* and *Sheikh Aziz Bukhari* proposing alternative solutions for the West Bank settlements. *Eliyahu McLean* and *Sheikh Bukhari* were also interviewed by the BBC in response to Obama's Cairo speech. Link to stories from the CRT website ([www.c-r-t.org](http://www.c-r-t.org))

Yale Professor *Bruce Wexler* is heading up a new project funded by the U.S. State Department to study the portrayal of “the other” in Israeli and Palestinian school books. The study will be conducted under the auspices of the *Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land*, which consists of the Supreme Judge of the Sharia Courts of Palestine, the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Palestinian Authority, the Chief Rabbis of Israel, the Greek, Latin and Armenian Patriarchs of Jerusalem and the Anglican and Lutheran Bishops of the Holy Land. *Mohammed Dajani*, previously featured by CRT, will serve on the Advisory Committee.

### Highlights from the Peacemakers

In April, over 200 people participated in an interfaith “Messiah's Meal” organized by *Eliyahu McLean*, *Ghassan Manasra* and *Abdul Aziz Bukhari* at the Lutheran Redeemer Church in Jerusalem. People came from the West Bank and Israel to attend this joyous celebration and share teachings about redemption and peace.



*Women Reborn*, the social empowerment project for Arab women in Fureidis, received funds to add a small business training component to their core curriculum. The new project will use the development of a home catering business to teach basic business skills.



CRT photographer *Pat Westwater-Jong* spent 2 months in Israel and Palestine documenting peace efforts. This fall she will give talks on the interfaith peace movement, the impact of the Wall, and political action in the settlements. Her first presentation will be at Massachusetts Representative *Niki Tsongas*'s office.



On May 3<sup>rd</sup> over 800 people from Israel & Palestine gathered for the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual “Jerusalem Hug”. *Ibrahim Abu El-Hawa* organized a “painting for peace” activity for the younger children, and the day concluded with a drumming circle featuring a “grandmother drum” from Alaska.

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