

## Seminarians Visit the West Bank and Israel

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Sixteen future religious leaders - rabbinical students and Christian seminarians &ndash; from the Auburn Theological Seminary traveled throughout the West Bank and Israel this June to engage in learning and dialogue about the most controversial Jewish-Christian issue &ndash; Palestine/Israel.

Auburn Theological Seminary is rooted in Christian tradition that honors learning, respects religious diversity, promotes social justice and is committed to serving God by educating present and future leaders of many traditions to face contemporary challenges.

The group's first full day in Jerusalem began with presentations about intercultural dialogue between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, many of whom know little of the experiences of their counterparts. Rabbi Ron Kronish, founder and director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, and Margaret Karram, an Arab-Israeli/Palestinian Catholic who is active in the Focolare movement, highlighted the insularity of cultural groups within Israel. They told the group how Jews and Palestinians often encounter one another superficially in public places, but seldom have meaningful relationships outside of their own communities.

Next, the group visited the site of the Last Supper, and visited the burial site of King David. Later in the day, most of the group ascended the Temple Mount and learned about the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Some rabbinic students went to a ritual bath (mikveh) to spiritually prepare beforehand.

The final stop of the day was the Christian Quarter, led by the intrepid Daniel Rossing of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish Christian Relations, which also included a visual tour of Jerusalem from the rooftop of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Each night after dinner the group engaged each other in dialogue about the events of the day.

The next day, the group headed to Bethlehem and walked through the checkpoint relegated to Palestinians crossing into the West Bank from Jerusalem. The group was welcomed at the office of Holy Land Trust, where they had a presentation from the director Sami Awad about the history of nonviolent resistance. They also met with the director of Hope Flowers School in the village of Al-Khader, Ghada Issa Ghabon where they were introduced to the situation of Palestinian students and education in a school threatened to be demolished due to its proximity to the Separation Wall.

The group had also the chance to tour Bethlehem, visit a refugee camp and learn more about the effects of the Separation Wall. They also met with Pastor Alex Awad, also a professor at the Bethlehem Bible College, where they discussed theological and political issues as well. In the evening, the group enjoyed dinner with local Palestinian families at a Bedouin style restaurant and a Palestinian Folklore dance, Dabkeh and spent the night at the families's homes.

The next morning, the group visited Efrata Settlement and met with Ardi Gildman, a Jewish settler and heard his point of view of the conflict. Then, they continued their way to the Tent of Nations, an organic farm outside the village of Nahalin that has been Nassar family's property for 100 years, and for some 15 years they have been struggling in the Israeli court system to protect their ownership. After hearing the hardships the family has to go through on daily basis, the group left back to Jerusalem for the Shabbat.