

A Moment for Celebration: A Mission Moment

We invite you to share the following story with your congregation. It should take no more than 2 minutes to read aloud. You might also wish to include the story in your church newsletter.

Celebration Story: Peace on Earth! Peace in Israel!

By Glenn E. Witmer, Mennonite Church Canada WITNESS worker in Jerusalem, Israel



We were driving to a concert at the Lutheran International Center in Bethlehem the day before Christmas Eve, and reached a heavily fortified Jerusalem-Bethlehem checkpoint. A sign instructing people to stop sits atop a holiday message, as Israeli border police wait for vehicles at the main checkpoint passage. The Army's sign in Hebrew, Arabic, and English, states "*Stop and wait for instructions. Prepare documents for inspection.*" The holiday message, posted by the Israeli Tourism Ministry, and decorated with bells and a red ribbon, wish Christians "*Happy Holidays and a Happy New Year*"

"*A call to all people of faith: Visit the Holy Land now*", declared another Tourism Ministry sign hanging on the concrete slabs near the checkpoint. For the first Christmas season in five years, Israel

and the Palestinians are cooperating to boost tourism to encourage Christian pilgrims to visit the Holy Land during the holiday. "This is our personal greeting for a happy holiday from Israel," said Rafi Ben-Hur, the Israeli Tourism Ministry's deputy director. "We see the pilgrims as a bridge for peace." Israeli army representatives handed out baskets of candies to the pilgrims crossing into Bethlehem from Jerusalem. The pilgrims were being asked to give the candies to the Palestinians, "from the Israelis", Ben-Hur prompted them. "We certainly hope that these events are a positive sign for the future."

There have been many visitors in the past. A young couple, pregnant with child, arrived on a donkey once. Several eastern men on camels arrived sometime later. Millions of others over the centuries have followed in their footsteps, and still do today.

The wall is continuing to be built. The separation fence still keeps two peoples from easy visits to each other, or working for a peaceful future.

But there are encouraging signs! Even candy from Jewish Israeli soldiers to Palestinian children... at Christmas. Peace on Earth! Building bridges for peace in Israel!

For more information and stories on the Middle East by Glenn Edward Witmer, see www.mennonitechurch.ca/news/jerusalemletter/