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## 3 faiths coming together for Mideast trip

### Muslims, Jews, Christians from Indy to promote cooperation among religions

By **Robert King**

Posted: May 12, 2008

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They will travel halfway around the world together, build a house for a needy family together and reach out to refugees of war together.

But showing people how different faiths can work together for the common good is the biggest thing a group representing Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities in [Indianapolis](#) hopes to achieve on a trip next month to the Middle East.

ADVERTISEMENT The 15-member caravan making the unlikely pilgrimage to Jordan, Syria and [Israel](#) includes a rabbi, an imam and two Christian ministers. They will build a Habitat for Humanity-type home in Jordan, carry medical and educational supplies to Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria, and visit some of their faiths' holiest shrines in Israel.

In a part of the world where the United States is frequently seen as an aggressor, they say they want to represent America's gentler, humanitarian side and show what it means to respect religious differences.

"I hope it is a model and an example that the faiths can be united to do good things for other people and that politics and theology shouldn't get in our way," said Rabbi Lew Weiss, a hospital chaplain and chair of the Indianapolis Interfaith Alliance, one of several interfaith groups represented among the travelers.

Some of the pilgrims are veterans of a pair of Habitat for Humanity building projects that enlisted Muslim, Christian and Jewish volunteers. Those projects were deemed the "House of Abraham," a reference to the Biblical patriarch who fathered all three faiths. There are plans for a third home-building in Indianapolis this fall.

Charlie Wiles, who organized next month's trip for the Indianapolis-based International Interfaith Initiative, said the home-building in Jordan promises to be one of the first Habitat-style projects in the Middle East conducted jointly

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A 15-member interfaith group from Indianapolis -- including members of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities -- will leave June 13 for a two-week trip to the Middle East. When they aren't building a house in Jordan or serving Iraqi refugees in Syria, they plan to take in a few sights along the way. Here's a look at some of them.

• **The Umayyad Mosque, Damascus:** Standing on a site that was sacred ground to ancient pagans and early Romans, it is now home to one of the oldest mosques in the world, dating back to the early eighth century. Its golden mosaic is one of the largest in the world. The tomb of Saladin, a powerful Muslim who lived in the 12th century, and a shrine said to be the resting place of the head of John the Baptist are located there.

• **The Western Wall, Jerusalem:** A portion of the wall that is the only remaining structure from the second Jewish temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in the first century. Some Jewish authorities have held that the wall is as close to the actual temple as Jews can come for now. Traditionally, Jewish pilgrims and others write prayers on paper and slip them into crevices in the wall as a way of communicating with God.

• **The Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem:** A church located over the cave where, according to Christian tradition, Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary.

Sources: Jewish Virtual Library, [www.sacred-destinations.com](#), BBC News World edition.

-- Robert King

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by American Muslims, Christians and Jews.

The work we are going to do is a drop in the bucket it is a small thing," Wiles said. "But symbolically it is going to resonate much further than that."

Michael Saab, a Syrian Muslim, said he hopes the

Center on Indianapolis Northside, said he hopes the work and understanding for Muslims in the region who

aren't sure what America stands for, which he sees as helpful in the [war on terror](#).

"I think it would go a long ways -- further than we can probably imagine or appreciate -- in bringing about peace and understanding and reconciliation than what we can do with armor, bombs and bullets."

The Rev. David Berry, an associate pastor at Second Presbyterian Church on the Far Northside, said the trip is another example of the strong interfaith relationships in Indianapolis. Though faith groups in many cities are just starting to talk, Indianapolis' faith community is taking on an ambitious project like this one.

"I think we are ahead of many places in the country," he said.

The two-week trip, which starts June 15, begins with five days in Jordan's capital of Amman, where the group will meet with local humanitarian groups and build a modest, 600-square-foot concrete house. In both Jordan and Damascus, Syria -- the second stop -- the group will bring a small supply of relief items to Iraqi refugees.

Recent estimates put the number of Iraqi refugees at 2 million.

"I just believe that crisis is not being talked about in this country," Wiles said.

In Israel, the group will visit local religious leaders, community groups and, they hope, plant the seeds for a future Habitat build.

Throughout the trip, the group will make short visits to some of the most important shrines of their respective faiths: the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus; the Western Wall in Jerusalem; and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Some of the destinations -- and the group's composition -- make the journey more complicated than a typical vacation.

There are few Jews in Syria, which President Bush has called a state sponsor of terror for its suspected support of groups that have made the destruction of Israel part of their goals. Weiss, the rabbi in the group, said he is somewhat anxious about that part of the trip. But he is focused on the fact that his purpose is to serve humanitarian needs.

"I think there are some risks worth taking if this can make a difference and hopefully open up the Syrian government," he said. "I feel you also have to talk to your enemy."

Call Star reporter Robert King at (317) 444-6089.

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