

Organizers of Reconciliation Walk Say Effort Defused Mideast Tensions

Leaders say people in the Middle East were touched when Christians apologized for 900-year-old injustices

Amid religious and ethnic tensions and unceasing violence, groups of Western charismatic and evangelical Christians are traveling the “dark and bloody grounds” of the Middle East, trying to personify the conciliatory love that Christ commanded.

The Reconciliation Walk has moved from apologizing for the historical misrepresentations of Christianity during the Crusades to dealing with contemporary stumbling blocks that hinder Turks, Arabs, Jews and other Middle Easterners from considering seriously the claims of Christ.

From 1996-99 the Reconciliation Walk mobilized 2,500 Western Christians from a variety of countries and churches to retrace the footsteps of the 11th-century crusaders. Their trek took them from Germany through the Balkans and the Middle East to Jerusalem. Along the route they offered an apology to Muslims, Jews and Eastern Christians for the atrocities committed against their forefathers by Western Christians during the Crusades.

Many participants of the Reconciliation Walk told Charisma that it was both astounding and perplexing to them as “historyless” Westerners that the historical Crusades still shape the Middle Eastern perception of Christianity. They said their apologizing for something that happened 900 years ago made a genuine difference to people.

“The reception given to us, and the receptivity of the Middle

Easterners—political and religious leaders as well as grassroots—to the apology surpassed all expectations,” said Reconciliation Walk director Lynn Green, the European and Middle East director of Youth With a Mission. “But we were also told repeatedly that to be trustworthy we must keep the reconciliation process going.”

A permanent office was set up in Beirut, Lebanon, headed by teacher Cathy Nobles, of Texas, who has been the training director of the Reconciliation Walk from the beginning. The office coordinates two-week study tours for Western church-teams that want to come to Middle East countries.

The program includes meetings with religious and community leaders, as well as with everyday people of the communities visited. Opportunities are offered in Lebanon to visit schools and universities.

“Our goal remains the overcoming of negative stereotypes through face-to-face encounters,” Nobles said. “You cannot show love or communicate sincerely with stereotypes.”

She added that in spite of Middle Easterners’ strong political and religious feelings against the West, they are “eager to dialogue

with Westerners who come with a listening attitude.” The Beirut office hopes to host many church teams from the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

Reconciliation Walk participants are encouraged to “live” the gospel message, rather than “proclaim” it. The concept of truth in the Middle East is different from what it is in the West, Green said. People “believe your life rather than your words,” he said.

Motivation for the original

Reconciliation Walk came from a desire to counter the fact that most Turks and Arabs still view Christianity in light of

the medieval Crusades. To them it is a Western political movement bent on conquering the Middle East by military means, Green said. Most Jews see Christianity as a Western and potentially anti-Semitic religion, though Green said the Holocaust overshadows their memory of the Crusades.

In contrast, Green said, Reconciliation Walk participants realized that many contemporary Western Christians view the Middle East through a "crusader lens," picturing Turks and Arabs as "humanly inferior and intrinsically violent people." The result of this among today's churches is a tendency to fear and avoid Middle Easterners and to advocate the use of political and military measures to control them.

"This is clearly not what Christ wants us to do," Green said. "The first loyalty of Christians must be toward Christ's Christ's way was not to dominate or kill your enemies but to love them."

Summing up the ministry of the ongoing Reconciliation Walk, Green said it is "diffusing the enmity, undoing the stereotypes and helping Christians to think in a Christlike fashion."

For further information on the Reconciliation Walk, logon at .