

connections

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Our Mission is to make the worship of God primary in all our gatherings, foster relationships within and outside the Alliance, create places of refuge and renewal for those wounded or ignored by the church, side with the poor, pursue justice with and for the oppressed, care for the earth, work for peace, honor wisdom and lifelong learning, and hold ourselves accountable for equity, collegiality and diversity.

'SIDE WITH THE POOR. PURSUE JUSTICE FOR THE OPPRESSED.'

That was Alliance board member Bonnie Dixon's role in observing elections in Zimbabwe

The Alliance mission statement is clear: We will side with those who are poor and pursue justice with and for those who are oppressed.

Board member Bonnie Dixon recently had a chance to demonstrate those very principles on behalf of the Alliance when she was selected by the World Council of Churches to be an observer during the June elections in Zimbabwe.

"In the eyes of the people I talked with, and certainly those representing the churches, this was an action of solidarity; it meant to them that 'the church' in the United States was standing alongside them in their struggle to have a fair and free voice in their governmental process," Bonnie said.

Because of her previous volunteer work in Zimbabwe and the Alliance's partnership with the Baptist convention there, Bonnie was selected to join a 95-

person international ecumenical peace observation team sent by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva.

The elections were among the most significant in Zimbabwe's history because there was a real threat that, for the first time, power could be removed from the ruling political party. Violence, widespread agitation, and general turmoil were prevalent in the weeks surrounding the election.

"The leaders I talked with said the violence decreased somewhat once international observers began arriving," Bonnie said. "But they were more interested in trying to convey to me their gratitude for the demonstration of connectedness and support in the election process — which is far more vital to them in everyday ways than our elections are to us."

As an observer, Bonnie's role was to determine if the country's electoral laws allowed for free and fair elections. She

spent a few days in the capital of Harare for orientation on electoral law, the country's history and the current political atmosphere. She was then assigned to the area around Mutare, in the Eastern Highlands bordering Mozambique. She was allowed inside the voting and counting places to observe and take notes on all aspects of the voting procedure, and, with other observers, invited to write a report after the election.

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*Alliance
board
member
Bonnie
Dixon*



Former Alliance President John Ewing Roberts of Baltimore, shown at left, organized an Alliance-sponsored tour of Israel, and led several Bible study sessions during the trip.

Israel: the alliance/melitz combination proved ideal

By Relma Hargus, Alliance member from Baton Rouge

The land of Israel and its people became the primary texts for a recent 10-day study trip sponsored by the Alliance in conjunction with the Melitz Center for Interfaith Encounter with Israel.

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Zimbabwe elections

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Bonnie was the only WCC representative from the United States, selected upon the recommendation of Executive Director Stan Hastey. She said that many people were grateful the international peace observers were there. "They didn't know that so many people cared," she said. "They told us that our presence changed the atmosphere there."

"Being a part of this made me realize even more that what we do matters. It was a profound experience for me, not because of the violence, or the election itself, it was profound because of my deeper awareness of the impact this had on people, particularly in the churches."

"By working with an ecumenical organization like the World Council of Churches, we made a broad statement of the role of people of faith in the world. It's a role of justice that goes farther than denominational lines."

Bonnie is associate pastor of Millbrook Baptist Church in Raleigh and is chair of the Alliance's missions committee. The *Raleigh News and Observer* wrote a long article about her involvement in Zimbabwe. It may be read at <http://newsobserver.com/standing/collections/tarheel/200000006364.html>.



B P F N A S U M M E R C O N F E R E N C E

Alliance board members Richard Groves and Martha Barr were among those attending this year's Summer Conference sponsored by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. Preaching, at left, is Rebeca Montemayor, the co-pastor of Shalom Baptist Community and dean of the ecumenical seminary in Mexico City. Rebeca was featured recently in *connections* when she became the first Baptist woman ordained in Mexico. The summer conference was held July 10-15 at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC. Several Alliance members were a part of the program, including former president Nancy Hastings Sehested and founding member Mahan Siler. The theme for the week was *On Earth as it in is Heaven*.



Georgia chapter to meet

The Annual Convocation of the **Georgia chapter** of the Alliance of Baptists will be held Oct. 20-21 at Cohutta Springs Retreat Center in Crandall, GA. The theme will be *Care of Earth, Care of Souls*, and will be led by Ted Purcell, campus minister at Duke University and a member of the Alliance task force on the environment. For information contact Brian Dixon in Atlanta, 404/377-6568, bdixon@learnlink.emory.edu.



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ALLIANCE CHURCHES ELIGIBLE FOR M&M BENEFIT PLANS

Member churches of the Alliance of Baptists are now eligible to enroll their pastoral staffs and lay employees in the benefit plans administered by The Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board (MMBB) of American Baptist Churches. This comes as a result of two important decisions:

1. In 1999 the Board of Directors of the Alliance voted to endorse MMBB's benefit plans for its churches.
2. Earlier this year, the Internal Revenue Service issued a private letter ruling permitting MMBB to offer its benefit plans to Baptists in non-American Baptist groups.

In addition to the endorsement from the Alliance of Baptists, the Progressive National Baptist Convention has endorsed MMBB's plans for its churches, and other Baptist groups are considering similar action.

The plans administered by MMBB include the Retirement/Death Benefits Plans and The Annuity Supplement. In addition, ministers and employees of Alliance churches will be eligible for benefits endorsed by MMBB, including medical plans and long-term care insurance.

Relma Hargus said it best. "I will read both the Bible and the newspaper differently from now on."

Relma was one of the 20 people who participated in the Alliance of Baptists study tour of Israel under the leadership of the Melitz Center for Interfaith Encounter with Israel, based in Jerusalem.

Five years ago at the Annual Convocation in Vienna, VA, the Alliance adopted a statement of Christian-Jewish relations which stated in part: "We call on all Baptists to join us in . . . Educating ourselves and others on the history of Jewish-Christian relations from the first century to the present, so as to understand our present by learning from our past."

The choice of the Melitz Institute to lead us on this journey of understanding was not made lightly. In Hebrew the word "melitz" means "interpreter" and our hosts from the Melitz Institute certainly lived up to that description. We were introduced to the Israel of the Hebrew scriptures; the land Jesus knew; the history of Jewish-Christian relations since the time of Christ; the founding of the State of Israel; the competing interests of Jews, Christians and Arabs; and the complexity of each of those groups in contemporary Israel.

But even more than the deluge of information and the long list of sites visited, what stands out in my memory most vividly are the individuals we met along the way including:

- Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Arab Christian who pastors the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, a congregation which has developed a ministry called Authentic

perspectives



By Jeanette Holt
Associate Director

Tourism, offering Christian visitors to the holy sites a more wholistic view of the land and the people of Israel and Palestine.

- Michael Wegier who took us to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. Michael supervises Melitz's work with Diaspora Jews.
- John Driscoll, a Catholic priest who now lives in Jerusalem and has dedicated his life to the transformation of Christian-Jewish relations.

- Daniel Rossing who served as the Director of the Department for Christian Communities in Israel's Ministry for Religious Affairs. Daniel not only led us in our tour of the Christian communities of Jerusalem but helped us to understand that each group in

Jerusalem is both a minority and a majority, "powerless and empowered, at one and the same moment."

- And finally, Ophir Yarden from Melitz, who met us at the airport in Tel Aviv and guided our travels and our discussions throughout our ten days in Israel. He challenged our assumptions, enlightened us at every turn, demonstrated a remarkable knowledge of Christian tradition and scripture and a deep love and realistic understanding of the Israel of yesterday and today.

This was far more than simply a summer vacation, a standard Christian tour of Bible lands. As we in the Alliance of Baptists seek to demonstrate our commitment to Jewish-Christian dialogue, the lessons and challenges of this first trip to Israel will continue to inform and challenge us. To quote Daniel Rossing again, "Only through the encounter with

the 'other' can we truly and fully fathom the infinite depths of our own unique other-ness, our own particular memories and visions of the future."

The Alliance study group in Israel.



VIRGINIA CHAPTER HAS TWO PROJECTS UNDERWAY

The Virginia Chapter of the Alliance of Baptists is sponsoring two mission projects and invites your involvement. First, the chapter is raising funds to support at least one student at the Baptist Theological Seminary of Zimbabwe. If you would like to contribute, send your gift, with an indication that it is for Zimbabwe, to Don Dunlap, 7001 Newport Avenue, Norfolk VA, 23505-4344. Second, the chapter is gathering books for shipment to the library at the Liberian Baptist Theological Seminary. Books should be in good condition and be appropriate for a theological library. Reference works, including commentaries, are especially welcome. Send them to Liberia Book Project, c/o Ginter Park Baptist Church, 1200 Wilmington Avenue, Richmond VA, 23227.

2000 Operating Budget:

Needs: \$142,877
 Receipts: \$146,950

2000 Mission Offering

Goal: \$85,250
 Receipts: \$36,375

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Israel trip: “When Christians get a text wrong, it can have serious, deadly, horrible consequences”

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The Alliance/Melitz combination proved ideal.

More than 25-years-old, Melitz is Israel’s leading informal educational institute. Since the creation in 1988 of its Interfaith Encounter program, Melitz has helped more than 20,000 people from 25 countries explore their own theology and commitments in a pluralistic world through tailor-made schedules.

The trip, coordinated stateside by Marylynn and John Roberts, was designed to gain greater understanding of the meaning and implications of a 1995 Alliance statement on Jewish-Christian relations adopted during John’s tenure as president.

In an early letter to participants, John said the statement would be a “driving force for our tour.” Indeed it was.

- A Friday evening synagogue service followed by an Erev Shabbat meal in a Jewish home confirmed the Christian teaching that God has not rejected Israel: God’s gifts and calling are “irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

Attending a Kabbalat Shabbat (Welcom-

ing the Sabbath) service and then joining in a stimulating, informative conversation with an observant Jewish family concretely demonstrated “the vibrancy, vitality and efficacy of the Jewish faith.”

- A “Sunday School” class on the Temple Mount steps provided alternative interpretations of Matthew 23, verses traditionally used to “foster religious stereotyping and prejudice against Jewish people and their faith.”

“When Christians get a text wrong, it can have serious, deadly, horrible consequences,” John said. Instead, he challenged the traditional anti-Jewish interpretation by placing the passage in its first-century context.

Likewise, conversations with the knowledgeable Melitz guides provided authentic Jewish scriptural lenses.

- Constructive, healing Jewish-Christian dialogue modeled by many throughout the trip validated the Alliance

commitment to seek “dialogue built on mutual respect and the integrity of each other’s faith.”

Among the examples were the residents of Nes Ammim, a Christian kibbutz in Western Galilee, who consider themselves reconcilers, not missionaries intent on conversion, and John Driscoll, a Catholic educator committed to teaching the errors of supersessionism that says Christianity replaced Judaism.

“We’re siblings,” Driscoll said, explaining

THE ALLIANCE: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE?

Members of the Alliance Interfaith Relations committee — chaired by David Waugh, one of those on the trip — are preparing a study guide on Jewish-Christian dialogue based on the Alliance statement.

David said the committee is also reworking the statement to make it more easily understood and to extend its audience beyond the Alliance of Baptists membership.

how both rabbinical Judaism and Christianity are rooted in biblical Judaism. “God continues to work in Judaism.”

- Exposure to the reality of places like Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka and Dachau at Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial, will undoubtedly encourage participants in “lifting our voices quickly and boldly against all expressions of anti-Semitism.”

Last call: Applications for financial assistance through the 2001 Alliance Mission Offering were due Aug. 1. Contact the Alliance office immediately if you represent an organization which would like to apply for funding.