

Course in Israel brings Bible to life

Last August, a group of 17 students and two professors left Concordia Seminary for a 14-day class in Israel. At the time, there was much concern in St. Louis, and the country, about unrest in nearby Ferguson, Missouri, following the shooting of a black teenager by a white police officer. In fact, the day they left a no-fly zone was issued over Ferguson. Trading a city in upheaval for the Middle East, where a tentative cease-fire had only just been reached, the group trusted God would be with them on their journey.

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TOBY SCHMIDT,
FOURTH-YEAR
M.DIV. STUDENT

“God’s hand was definitely on this trip,” said fourth-year student Toby Schmidt, describing how the fighting ceased at just the right times for their trip to proceed as planned. Although there were some reminders of the turmoil in the region, such as when rockets and an F-16 flew overhead as they visited Abraham’s well at Beer Sheba, they felt very safe. In fact, the cease fire held until after they had returned home.

The primary goals of the course were to study the Bible within the context of the geography of the Holy Land and

to develop new preaching and teaching skills based on their experiences. By all accounts, they more than met both goals. Pastor Tom Zelt from Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Fremont, California, served as the trip leader, having been to Israel more than 25 times.

Dr. Rick Marrs, associate professor of practical theology at the Seminary, served as the faculty mentor and adviser for the trip.

“We walked where Jesus was born and walked and taught His apostles,” said Marrs. “We realized how seeing the land changes the way we hear Jesus’ words in the Gospel.” The history of the Holy Land, shared expertly

by Zelt, was of primary importance.

“Now when we read Scripture, the words (English, Greek, and Hebrew) pop with even more clarity and meaning.”

But this was more than simply a “spiritual experience” for the students. It was a Seminary course that combined exegetical and pedagogical theology and included many hours of prework. Students were assigned a number of books to read and more than 20 hours of map work before the trip. From a geographical standpoint, they became familiar with where key biblical figures

had walked and where important battles, and even miracles, had taken place. After visiting the locations in person, the students were challenged to think about how they would effectively teach “the Word becoming Flesh” to people in their future congregations and were graded upon their lecture plans and knowledge of the land.

For second-year student Andrew Lehenbauer, physically walking in the footsteps of Jesus and other biblical figures was an experience that helped make the stories come to life. “It’s almost as if the land is another Gospel,” he said. “Standing there, taking it all in, helped me to understand what was going on behind the scenes. Israel is like a pop-up book for the Bible with stories really coming to life.”

Most days began by 8 a.m. with devotions taking place on the bus en route to their first destination. On average, the group toured seven to 10 sites each day. Some of the many places they went included Nazareth, Mount Arbel, Beer Sheba, Bethlehem, Mount Carmel, Aphek, Jericho, the Jordan River, and Jerusalem. The map work they had done before the trip enabled them to match the actions described in the Bible to the physical locations they were visiting, which helped bring the stories alive.

The photo at left is second-year student Andrew Jones’ map of Joshua 10. It shows Joshua’s trek from Gilgal (at the top with the green arrow going down) to Gibbeon, Beth Horon, and Azekah. Other landmarks such as the Aijalon Valley, marked in brown, also are noted. Beyond the edges of the map, the actual landscape of the region can be seen. “It was a long day for Joshua and a long day for us as well,” Jones said. “It’s overwhelming in a way to behold all this. To think these characters actually ran through here. They lived and fought and died in this region—from Abraham to Joshua to David to Solomon, and continuing on to Jesus Himself.”

“The focus of the trip was to equip new pastors with an understanding of the biblical account in its geographic, historic, and cultural setting, and to pick up tools to be able to teach it effectively,” said Zelt. “However, we didn’t ignore the present day situation of the Christians who struggle daily.”

The situation is personal to Zelt, who has parishioners with Christian family members in the Gaza area who keep them informed of what it’s like to live out their Christian faith in such a place.

The group made an important stop at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, whose pastor, Mitri Raheb, is a close friend of Zelt’s.

Raheb’s staff explained their ministry among the Palestinian community as well as what it’s like to be a Palestinian Christian. The group took some time to sing Christmas songs in the sanctuary and explore a cave stable underneath the church that was probably very much like the stable where Jesus was born in Bethlehem.



Concordia Seminary students stand atop Mount Arbel, overlooking the Sea of Galilee, taking in the view of area where much of Jesus’ ministry took place. Photo: Robert Bailey

They also learned about living as a Christian in Israel from Dicko, their Israeli tour guide. As an Armenian Christian, Dicko was able to avoid the red tape and friction between Jews and Muslims and their group was able to travel freely to sites claimed by both sides.

They visited the Holy Sepulcher, the Temple Mount, a mosque, and an Armenian chapel where they saw Christian graffiti from the third century A.D.

The idea for the students’ trip to Israel came from an anonymous donor at Zelt’s church who wanted future pastors to learn the Word of God right where it happened. That donor provided funds that greatly reduced the cost for the students

and made it affordable for them to go. Zelt, with his extensive experience in leading trips to the Holy Land, was the perfect leader.

For the Seminary, his leadership was a double blessing because the students benefited not only from his extensive knowledge of Israel and the Bible, but

also from his experience as a parish pastor in the mission field.

“One of our strategic priorities is to connect students with congregations,” said Dr. Jeffrey Kloha, provost of Concordia Seminary. “Having Pastor Zelt leading the trip and sharing his insights was an incredible experience for them. The more that we have good pastors helping our students grow, the better prepared they will be to serve their future congregations.”

Feedback about the trip was overwhelmingly positive. “This class and tour has been one of the most formative experiences in my Seminary education,” said Schmidt. “I read, reflect on, and teach the Bible in a whole new way. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for all Seminary students, pastors, and professors to go to the Holy Land. If you are going to be teaching the Bible, you should really go where it all happened.”

The Seminary is grateful to the donors who helped make this trip, and others like it, possible. If you would like to help students and faculty learn through formation trips, please contact our Advancement staff at 800-822-5287 or advancement@csl.edu, or make a gift at www.csl.edu/give.



A map created by second-year student Andrew Jones illustrates where stories from the Bible took place and shows the deep connection between the Gospel and the land. Photo: Andrew R. Jones