

First Presbyterian Church, Marietta, Georgia Chancel Choir Holy Land Mission Tour

Calvert Johnson



Tour members at the Cathedral Church (Episcopal) of St. George the Martyr, Jerusalem



At the Greek Orthodox Chapel, Baptism Site, Jordan

Saturday, June 18, Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, Amman, Jordan
Sunday, June 19, Cathedral Church (Episcopal) of St. George the Martyr, Jerusalem
Monday, June 20, Bethlehem Bible College, Bethlehem, Palestine
Tuesday, June 21, St. Andrew's Church of Scotland, Jerusalem
Wednesday, June 22, Episcopal Church of the Holy Family, Raineih (Nazareth), Israel

It is not unusual for a church choir to go on tour. Favorite destinations are the cathedrals of England, Italy, or France. Indeed, previous tours of the Chancel Choir of First Presbyterian Church, Marietta, Georgia, included Italy, Ireland, Scotland, and various regions of the United States, travelling approximately every three years. But according to the GuidingStar Travel Agency, owned by a Palestinian Christian family, the June 2011 Holy Land Mission Tour of this choir from northwest suburban Atlanta was the first time in nearly ten years that their agency has worked with a Christian church choir to tour in the Middle East. The choir, directed by Edward Schneider and accompanied by organist Calvert Johnson and trumpeter Yvonne Toll, sang on five occasions—two Vesper services and three concerts—at four churches and one college, located in Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and Jerusalem.

Seldom does a touring choir meet the local people, unless staying with host families. More typically, the choir arrives in a town, rehearses and performs at the local church or cathedral, and mostly stays together at hotels, restaurants, and touring local attractions. A very special feature of this choir tour was the opportunity to get acquainted with local people in Amman (Jordan), Jerusalem, Bethlehem (Palestine), and Raineih (just

outside of Nazareth, Israel), including Christian and Muslim Palestinians, Jordanians, and Israelis (Jewish and Arab). Warm friendships were struck up with the clergy and congregations at the four churches and at the interdenominational Christian college in Bethlehem, encouraged by the post-performance receptions, where tasty local pastries and beverages were prepared for the choir.

The Presbyterians have a very limited presence in the Holy Land (the choir sang at the only Church of Scotland—St. Andrew's—located in west Jerusalem). On the other hand, Presbyterians and Methodists collaborate with the Anglican community, hence the performances at the three Episcopal churches: Redeemer in Amman, St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, and Holy Family in Raineih/Nazareth. Presbyterians also support many of the institutions and schools in the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, and a highlight of the tour was a visit to the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf in Salt, Jordan (no, the choir did not attempt to sing to the deaf!), a specialized school for Christian and Muslim children and youth from kindergarten through high school, led by a dedicated staff, even working one on one in the case of students who are both deaf and blind. The choir was so impressed by this school, its staff and teachers, its students, and its facilities, that they "adopted" the Holy Land Institute, and will periodically send financial support in the future.

Another highlight for this Presbyterian choir was singing at Vespers at the Cathedral in Jerusalem on Sunday evening, on a weekend coinciding with the annual meeting of international representatives of the Anglican and Lutheran churches, including the Anglican Primate of Canada and Lutheran bishops from various parts of Germany and Scandinavia. The repertoire ranged from a setting of the Magnificat (intentionally chosen to be sung at Vespers), to the Lord's Prayer in



First Presbyterian Church Chancel Choir at the Episcopal Church of the Holy Family, Raineih (Nazareth), Israel



Edward Schneider with students at the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf, Salt, Jordan

Arabic, to African-American spirituals and shape-note folk hymns, to contemporary American anthems.

Everywhere that the choir visited, the message from local Christians was the same: pray for peace, and pray not only for the leaders of countries in the Middle East—Palestine and Israel, as well as their neighbors—but also for the leaders of the United States.

This message resounded in the remarks by Rustom Mikhjian, the associate director of the Baptism Site in Jordan. This Armenian Christian led the choir to see the archaeological evidence of third- and fourth-century Christians on the east bank of the Jordan near where it empties into the Dead Sea (Bethany Beyond Jordan, as the Bible identifies John's neighborhood). His account included reciting documentary evidence from the New Testament about John the Baptist, pilgrims' diaries, and historic chronicles. Mikhjian's passion and enthusiasm for the Baptism Site and its meaning—historic as well as spiritual—were contagious! The Jordanian government's support for developing the area as a spiritual retreat rather than a gaudy tourist attraction is evident in the quality controls mandated by HRH Prince Ghazi for each of the chapels built on this site.

The message of peace was also a high priority in Bethlehem, heard at the Church of the Nativity, at the Christian-

operated stores featuring olive wood crosses and crèches, in the introductory remarks at the concert at Bethlehem Bible College, and as the choir waited at the checkpoint to leave Bethlehem and return to Jerusalem.

It was quite an experience to visit Biblical and historic sites everywhere on the tour, including wonder-of-the-world Petra, well-preserved Roman-era Jerash, the Wadi Rum desert where the ancient Hebrew nomads sought the Promised Land, Mount Nebo where Moses saw this Promised Land to which he was denied entry, the Via Dolorosa, Golgotha, the Mount of Olives, Peter's house near the Sea of Galilee, and the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, to list just a few. One of the deepest emotional moments was singing *Amazing Grace* in the prison where Jesus was held before his crucifixion. Nonetheless, what made this mission tour different from all others taken by the choir was interacting with the local people, hearing about their experiences as Christians, Jews, and Muslims living today in a very difficult neighborhood that is anything but peaceful.

Full details of the tour can be found on the choir's Holy Land Mission Tour blogsite, <<http://fpcchancelchoirholylandmissiontour.blogspot.com/>>, written each day by a different member of the tour group (about ten spouses, family members, and other interested church members travelled with the 24 members of the choir). Church choirs in North America are particularly encouraged to consider a similar tour of the Holy Land—we enjoyed large, appreciative audiences in good acoustics, and repeatedly we heard how much it meant to the local people that an American choir had come to them. Frankly, the members of the tour group from Marietta, Georgia, were the ones who derived the greatest blessings from this trip: blessings not only from walking where Jesus had walked, but from meeting the local people. ■

Calvert Johnson is organist at First Presbyterian Church, Marietta, Georgia, and Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus at Agnes Scott College. He earned the doctorate in organ performance with Karel Paukert at Northwestern University and serves as national treasurer of the American Guild of Organists.

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