

Postcards from



Trips to sacred region make Bible 'more real' for Kentucky Baptists

By Ken Walker, State Correspondent

Published in Western Recorder on January 18, 2011

Louisville—Although James Cahoe had visited Israel four times on business, he had a life-changing experience two years ago when he traveled there with a tour group.

Led by Les Hollon, then pastor of St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, several days after the group's arrival, Cahoe had a dream.

He said he doesn't remember what it was about, but he awoke with Ezekiel 37:4-5 on his lips: "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.'"

"That put flesh on the dry bones of scripture for me," said the retired engineer and former Sunday school teacher at St. Matthews Baptist.

"The trip made everything a little more real to me. When you read scripture and have images in your mind, a lot of times when you see it in person, it's a totally different idea."

Such vivid encounters help explain an increasing interest in Holy Land travel among Kentucky Baptists and Christians nationwide, according to Kathy Evitts, president of Dehoney Travel in New Albany, Ind.

Statistics from the Israel Ministry of Tourism showed an overall 19 percent increase in visitors during the first 11 months of 2010, compared to the previous year. Tour groups from the U.S. increased by 13 percent, with 2011 projected to be even better.

Arising out of annual post-Christmas visits arranged by her father, Wayne Dehoney—pastor of Walnut Street Baptist Church from 1967-85 and a former Southern Baptist Convention president—Dehoney Travel originally was known as BibleLand Travel.

A decade ago, a Palestinian uprising, fears of a Y2K calamity and the terrorist attacks of 2001 put a damper on travel to Israel. However, a lessening of concern over terrorism has coincided with increasing interest in the historic nation.

"The numbers are up over the last couple of years," said Evitts, who has been to Israel nearly 40 times. "We've got pastors calling us, asking for material."

For evangelical churches the Holy Land always is a destination because as people study the Bible they want to learn more about the geographic locations behind it, Evitts said.



A pastor leads a tourist group Bible study in the town of Caesarea. According to the Israel Ministry of Tourism, tour groups increased 13 percent last year.

(Photo courtesy of Kathy Evitts)

'Strong' interest ... Craig Loscalzo knew something was stirring when he hosted a preview meeting last spring in Lexington for the trip to Israel he led that returned Jan. 9. Seventy-five people showed up, far more than he expected.

"Interest was strong," said Loscalzo, who retired last October as pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington. "We had a couple people sign up and back out because of job or health issues, but about half of them went on the trip."

In addition, two-thirds chose an optional, five-day extension to Egypt, compared to an average of one-third in the past.

After his first visit as a tourist in 1992, the latest was Localzo's fifth trip as a bus pastor. In that role, he delivered daily scriptural interpretations and led worship times as part of the Dehoney Travel tour.

The former professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary called the visits a good refresher course in biblical theology.

He said he also enjoys observing reactions from first-time visitors. "When you drive up to the Sea of Galilee and watch their awe it's a real blessing," Loscalzo said. "To their faces when they drive over a hill and look down on Jerusalem for the first time is another."

Many tour participants are Sunday school teachers and church leaders; the visits give them new resources for teaching and leading their congregations to a new appreciation of Christ, he added.

It also has changed Loscalzo's preaching. It is one thing to preach from Matthew 4 and another when you have seen the temple where Christ resisted Satan's temptation to throw Himself down, Loscalzo explained.

Jim Cobban has a similar fascination for the Holy Land after five visits. The pastor of First Baptist Church of Middletown said seeing the Sea of Galilee and looking over the hills at Capernaum brings everything together.

"I had been teaching the Bible since I was 16 years old," said Cobban, who has a Ph.D. from Southern Seminary. "To be in the place you've taught about for so long, everything makes sense. It's like a pop-up Bible, where the stories of scripture pop up.

"For Bible students, for the rest of their life the maps in the back of their Bible make sense. It's very moving when you know that something happened on (certain spots) and what it means to us today."

Worth the cost... While the \$3,300-plus cost (depending on the city of departure) can cause some to question the value, Cobban said every person he has encouraged to go has come back later to thank him.

Other Kentucky Baptists who have taken the trip agree that it is exhilarating.

Joyce Holmes of Walnut Street Baptist said her first reaction to seeing the Holy Land two years ago was awe that turned into tears of gratefulness and gratitude.

"It really did seem as if our group was privileged to relive history," she said. "Having a historian with us explaining and reviewing time periods was invaluable. The older hymn, 'I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked,' has come back into my memory with a new emphasis."

St. Matthews Baptist member Darlys Harmon-Vaught said it was important for her to walk the same roads while experiencing and visualizing the places that are mentioned in the Bible.

The experience helped "me gain a better understanding and perspective of the theology of Jesus," Harmon-Vaught said. "I was not baptized again in Israel but seeing others experience this was very important for me."

Visiting Israel also has an impact on church life once the tourists return home. Holmes said she wanted to do a better job of sharing her beliefs and experiences, including the reality of God's love and example behind good works.

"The clothing ministry of my church has been part of my volunteer life for over 25 years," the Walnut Street member said. "I know for sure we have seen things 'work out,' not because the workers are good at what we do, but because we are there to pass on God's love."

**Contact Dehoney Travel for info
on Holy Land tours or other exciting
destinations worldwide**



3008 Charlestown Crossing
New Albany, IN 47150

Phone: (800) 325-6708 or (812) 206-1080

Email: info@dehoneytravel.com

Website: www.dehoneytravel.com

facebook