

Women Exchange Project 6-15 October 2008

Evaluation Report:

AEI-Open Windows called the women, who participated in the exchange project to the Netherlands in October, for an evaluation meeting. The evaluation shed light on several issues such as the preparatory training period, hosting families, excursions, program, controversial issues, group relations and leadership.

The women had different opinions regarding the preparatory training period. Some of them said that the training period was enough, time-wise, but it focused on topics not strongly related to the program in Holland. It should have given the women information about AEI-Open Windows, as they considered themselves representatives of the institute. Others said that they needed more historical, geographical and political information about Bethlehem. Other women said: "Although the information gained during the training period was enough, we depended more on our experience and knowledge throughout the previous years".

When we asked the women about the hosting families, they all stressed on how generous, caring and loving people, that they felt at home. For instance, Magda was very content with the space and understanding her host gave to her. She said: "She was very respectful to my food habits" Elaine was so thankful to her host especially when she lost her suitcase. She said: "She told me to feel home and even offered her some of her clothes." She continued, "She was very warm to us, and she used to kiss our front-head when we were sleeping". Liana was impressed with her host, when she offered her own bedroom to Liana and slept in the study room. Since Liana has some interest in planting, her host took her to a tour to the fields. Silvana was astonished seeing the house of her host as she had her own room with an extremely beautiful bathroom with a Jacuzzi installed. She was impressed with the ability to sleep at night with the main house door open. Silvana enjoyed the chatting with her host about the institute and its activities and personnel. Aida was so excited talking about her host because she resembled a woman from Bethlehem called "Olga Ghattas". Finally, Judith and Rosette talked about their host Irna, who welcomed Rozette at the airport with balloons and presents since it was her birthday.

The women enjoyed the walking tours in Enschede and Ootmarsum,. It was raining and they were walking with umbrellas. Although they visited several churches, there saw only few believers, which irritated them a little because they compared what they saw with their own churches. They enjoyed the outdoor coffee shops and they enjoyed having a hot drink in one of them. They also saw old and young people riding bicycles, and they compared the situation back in Bethlehem where there are only few youths riding bicycles. They thought that maybe it is because of the hilly landscape in Palestine. Moreover, they enjoyed the cart tour in the wood, as they experienced how nice it is to ride a horse cart. The women saw everything big. For example, the trees and the horses were felt to be large and tall and definitely larger than those in the Middle East. Laurette said that they were laughing all the time. In the midst of the wood, they visited a very tall tree. For them these trees were

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typically Dutch! The women said that in the area where the tree is situated, lovers hang out. The women also enjoyed the visit to the library of Almelo. They were delighted when they saw their film "Blessed are the Olives: Voices of Palestinian Women" been presented there. They also saw Palestinian olive wood items and photos of the Wall.

The women visited a place called "House of Stories". They learned about the story and the history behind the construction of the place. What really influenced them was the fact that this place transformed the tragedy into joy. This place not only commemorates the consequences of the horrible fire that took place in 2000 during mother's day, but it also helps people to share their hopes and dreams. The women were touched with all the rooms of the house and the facilities each room contains. They even attended and participated in a mass by chanting in Arabic. The women were happy to see their drawings of hope being shown there.

The women also enjoyed visiting other places, such as the traditional museum in Enschede, where they saw old ploughs, lights, animals, wooden shoes and old costumes. They attended a musical concert center; where people came from different parts of the world to sing songs in different languages. They even sang a song in Arabic called "Ya Salam 'Aldunia". The women also visited a restaurant called "Paradise" made of antique and worn items. For instance, the sinks were used to make the stairs, and the toilet is made up of jar. Their visit to the police station was great not only because they were warmly welcomed by the policemen, but also because they felt safe and secured

The women had different experiences with the interfaith Bible-Qur'an Reading activity. First of all, they were divided into small groups of five to six with participation of Palestinian and Dutch women. Each group had different thoughts. Although respect prevailed among the participants during the working groups, there were hot discussions, especially when a Dutch woman assumed that Mary was pregnant after a relation with a Roman soldier. The Palestinian women realized that the Dutch women were not religious and didn't believe in Virgin Mary. Regardless of the differences in opinions and backgrounds, they were able to present the story of the Birth of Jesus Christ in the Bible and the Qur'an.

The presentations at schools were the most challenging activities for the women, because in general the students had no idea or background information about Bethlehem, and the Israeli Palestinian conflict. So the women talked about Bethlehem through stories and showed it on the World Map. They also talked about the youth life and the Christian-Muslim relations, and the Israeli Occupation of Palestine. The women narrated some personal stories about the first and the second uprising (Intifada). The school students were interested to learn about youth life under occupation and inter-religious mixed marriages. Most of the presentations helped to answer a major question - "How do you feel living in Palestine?"

It was very important for us as a sending organization to know whether the women were able to communicate their daily life stories and experiences. The women went beyond our expectations as they shared stories, prayers and services with others in masses. They performed a Palestinian traditional wedding and prepared food using Palestinian recipes.

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When talking about the relations among the women, they all said that they learned the value of tolerance. They used to support one another when needed, especially those who are not able to express themselves easily in English. Disagreements happened between some women but they were able to solve them. Elaine said: "I got too tired at the airport and all the women helped me, and a very nice priest gave me all the help needed after I lost my luggage". When we asked if they needed a leader for the group, they all said that they managed to lead themselves and take charge of tasks. For example, Elaine took charge of documentation, and she was called by the nickname "Maurice Michael" who is a local photographer. Moreover, Laurette was called after "George Zeinah", a local journalist, as she was reporting about every single visit, activity and she even collected brochures.

For a better future exchange project, the women recommended learning more about the activities at AEI-Open Windows, and about the situation in Palestine with regards to the occupation, culture, economics, etc.. They also found the need to improve their English especially the communication skills, although some of them impressed with their English communication skills. Furthermore, the women wanted to have more Dutch groups visiting them in Bethlehem. They thought of continuing joint activities like writing and sharing personal stories, and organizing future women and youth exchanges.

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