

ABRAHAM PATH INITIATIVE

SPONSORED BY THE GLOBAL NEGOTIATION PROJECT
AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

Finding a path to unity

[Jana Hollingsworth](#) Duluth News Tribune Published Saturday, December 23, 2006

Dr. Barbara Elliott held the common belief that Jesus was born in a wooden stable, and was surprised when she encountered the stone cave enclosed in Nativity Square in Bethlehem.

“Suddenly all those stories take on a reality ... a wonderful story that we sing ‘Silent Night’ about,” she said. “There’s a different sense of it all, being right there.”

Elliott, a professor at the University of Minnesota Medical School – Duluth, was part of a delegation of 20 scholars and religious leaders from 10 countries who retraced the path of the prophet Abraham through the Middle East last month. Bethlehem was a stop along the way.



The Abraham Path Initiative group stops before entering the community of Elba in northern Syria last month.

The venture, called the Abraham Path Initiative, is sponsored by Harvard University’s Global Negotiation Project.

Abraham is regarded as the founding patriarch of the Israelites and of the Arabic people in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions.

It was the first trip for the group, which gathered advice from leaders in most countries along the path on how to build a permanent route with signs, maps and a guidebook, and discussed with them how it would benefit the region.

The group — following the route documented in the Bible and the Quran — began in Turkey, traveled through Syria and Jordan, went to Bethlehem and Hebron in the West Bank, and then to Jerusalem and Israel. People of Christian, Islam and Jewish faiths made the journey.

“Abraham is the reason we were all there,” Elliott said. “To be with people of different traditions, walking in important sacred places, learning from one another and, hopefully, getting to a point where we can talk about the things we share rather than the differences we have. I experienced that.”

The group traveled by bus and on foot during the two-week, 600-mile trip that took them to places like Ummayad Mosque in Damascus, Syria, and Abraham's tomb in Hebron.

Elliott said she never felt unsafe, but a high level of caution was taken in Syria. In the West Bank, she felt the tension of the land.

"People were walking around with guns," she said. "I listen to the news differently now. Instead of hearing the news, I see the faces and feel the sadness. It is really violent and really the opposite of Abraham and what any of those traditions would want."

Martha Gilliland, the retired chancellor of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, is a project organizer. She said combining the commonality of Abraham and his values of hospitality, respect and faith with the cultural and historical sites of the path unites people. She doesn't speak Arabic, but used her pictures of her grandchildren to bridge communication gaps.

"Understanding was immediate," she said.

Most leaders in the countries they visited — with the exception of those in Syria — were receptive to the idea of a permanent path.

In the next three years, the group hopes to open segments of the path and bring tours wherever there is support. People of some nationalities are not able to cross certain borders, Gilliland said, so they can't work in a linear way.

Elliott told a story about meeting a 14-year-old boy shining shoes at a bazaar in Damascus. A woman in her group spoke Arabic and asked him to shine her shoes. It was clear he had never shined a woman's shoes before, Elliott said, but she spoke to him for a while and told him he would get a good tip. He shined the shoes of all the women in the group and spoke of how he was no longer in school because he needed to help support his family. It was an eye-opening experience for Elliott, but one that showed her how roots are shared.

Elliott's time in the Middle East helps give a unique perspective to students and faculty at UMD, said Ruth Westra, chairwoman of the department of family medicine and community health.

Elliott will give presentations on her experiences, so "it gives us an opportunity to travel without really traveling," Westra said.

Elliott, who was chosen for the trip based on her experience as a Kellogg National Leadership Fellow, focuses her UMD research on social justice issues in health care settings.

Her goal in participating was not only to help further the reality of a permanent path, but to share common interests with those of different backgrounds. She accomplished that,

and came home with something else: “An understanding of history that is real, not just stories,” she said.

For her, Nativity Square brought many of those stories to life.

“Outside on the square, there is the bedlam of the world happening — hawking jewelry, making deals,” she said.

But inside the cave, murals and frescoes adorn the walls and the structure surrounds you with a quiet simplicity.

“It was really quite amazing,” she said.

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