

Rev. Professor Simon Schoon of Nes Ammim gives ICCI November Library Lecture

On November 27, Rev. Professor Simon Schoon of Nes Ammim spoke at an ICCI Library Seminar at the ICCI Education Center on the topic of "The Project Nes Ammim and the 'Indissoluble Bond with the Jewish People.'" Professor Schoon, a retired pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church and a founder of the Dutch Council of Christians and Jews, is working at Nes-Amimm on dialogue projects over the coming year.



Schoon spoke about the history of Nes Ammim, a cooperative Christian village near Acre, that was established in 1963 by a Dutch physician, Johan Pilon. The name of the organization comes from a verse in Isaiah, which states "you shall be a sign to the nations." Nes Ammim sees itself as a neutral meeting ground for religious dialogue and encounters between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis.

Pilon, who had fought in the Dutch underground during World War II, originally came to Tiberias, Israel as a missionary. During his time there, he came to the realization that his task as a missionary was out of date and that Christians and Jews needed to forge a new relationship, instead of the traditional one that was based upon proselytizing. He dreamed of creating a place Jews and Christians could live together and where Christians learn about Judaism, the Holocaust, history, and Jewish-Christian relations. Additionally, this place would provide economic support for the beginnings of the State of Israel.

Professor Schoon emphasized that Nes Ammim's ideology, which focused on the common origins of Judaism and Christianity as well as the common scriptures, paved the way for tremendous changes in the Dutch Church, which eventually relinquished its missionary goals.

The settlement originally met with resistance from the local Jewish community, particularly Nes Ammim's immediate neighbor is Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta'ot, founded by survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Despite the initial protestations, a strong relationship was established with the community over time.

Most of Nes Ammim's original settlers were young Christians. Initially all the residents of Nes Ammim worked in agriculture: cotton, avocado, lemon trees and roses. With the decline in agriculture's productivity, Nes Ammim switched its main economic activity to the hospitality industry. Now Nes Ammim has a guest house, with a kosher kitchen and swimming pool and a youth hostel. Additionally, the facilities boast a House of Prayer where people from all religions can pray and where the Nes Ammim inhabitants host a regular Kabbalat Shabbat.

In October 2002 Nes Ammim started a new project called 'Center for Meeting and Dialogue.' Because of the trust established by the joint efforts of previous inhabitants and the living community of today, the center can be a more or less 'neutral' place for Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs too meet. Many coexistence organizations such as ICCI have since taken advantage of the Nes Ammim facilities for their various encounter programs. In fact, the Jerusalem Young Adult Interreligious Council, a joint project of ICCI and Palestinian Vision, held their founding conference there in June.

Schoon explained that Nes Ammim itself doesn't engage in dialogue with organizations, citing the language barrier as one of the challenges. However they would like to become more involved in the future and often keep abreast of the different encounters by meeting with members of the organizations and hosting seminars. Although the population of Nes Ammim had declined from 200 to 30, the village continues to be a thriving haven for those seeking interreligious dialogue and is continuously working toward building more bridges between Muslims, Jews and Christians.

Professor Schoon also spoke about the concept and controversy around the "indissoluble bond." In 2004, the Dutch Protestant Church reunited its three churches and created a document where in its Preamble, it confesses the "indissoluble bond" between the Church and Israel and supports mutual dialogue opportunities.

Some Jews have found this language uncomfortable, particularly because the authors explicitly mentioned 'People' of Israel instead of 'Land' of Israel or 'State' of Israel. Some Christians have questioned why there is such a bond with the Jewish people. Schoon related that a small minority in the Church, influenced by the Palestinian situation and sympathetic to their plight, wants to change the language. Schoon predicted, however, that the language in the preamble would remain, while more attention would be paid to the Palestinian situation and churches.

The professor finally spoke about his current efforts to reinvigorate Jewish-Christian dialogue efforts. While many in the Christian community were interested in engaging with Jews in the '60's and '70's, because of 9/11 and the increased focus on Islamic extremism, Christian-Muslim dialogue has moved much more to the forefront than Jewish-Christian dialogue. Currently Schoon is working with young students to engender greater awareness of the Jewish-Christian relationship, traveling with them to Poland and Israel and speaking about the origins of Christianity and their common scriptures.

During the Q & A session, attendees raised interesting conundrums. Rabbi Kronish, for example asked how interreligious groups could 'bring conflict into the dialogue' as opposed to shying away from the conflict out of fear that it would cause too much arguing and tension. Schoon suggested that politics should definitely form an important part of the dialogue, but that it might take time before the group can enter into these discussions, and they must develop adequate trust before embarking into this territory.