

Mideast community scorns violence as the norm

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Ahmad Hijazi and Howard Shippin are pioneers for peace in Israel.

Their families and 51 other Jewish and Palestinian families are residents of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, or Oasis of Peace, a small village between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv where people on both sides of the Middle Eastern religious divide are committed daily to dialogue rather than violence.

The two men spoke Sunday at San Antonio's First Presbyterian and Holy Trinity Presbyterian churches about their village and its School for Peace, which has spawned many leaders for Jewish and Palestinian organizations dedicated to peace, civil rights and dialogue.

"It's a challenging place to live; it's not all peace and harmony. Both sides have different things to learn," Shippin said.

Hijazi is a Palestinian Muslim. Shippin is an English-born Christian whose wife is Jewish. In 1984, both joined the Oasis of Peace, Israel's only community formed together by Palestinians and Jews.

Each side maintains its cultural and religious identity, but they celebrate each other's religious holidays and learn each other's language. They also share stories and learn to appreciate their different perspectives on issues.

That doesn't mean they don't argue. But they don't resort to violence to solve differences.

Hijazi said Palestinians are accustomed to being viewed as second-class citizens. Even when cooperating with Jews, they often are seen as the junior partner or the assistant, and the Jews are seen as the leaders or the higher authorities.

Palestinians must learn to take more responsibility, and Jews must learn to give up some responsibility in joint projects so the relationship between them is equal, Shippin said. But the speakers don't expect to find many others imitating their example.

"Most Jews and Arabs don't want to live together at the level of intensity that we do," Shippin said. "We'll always be the exception rather than the rule."

They also have no grand illusion that they'll change the political reality in the Middle East. Their community is only a symbol at best.

But its educational work has inspired others, and that makes them optimistic.

They see the vibrancy of Oasis of Peace after 35 years as a testament to the power of a few people to make a difference in society.

"We're not special people. We're ordinary people who decided to do something different," Hijazi said.

They are determined to weather constant changes and crisis in conflict-ridden Israel.

"That's because we know we cannot afford to fail," Hijazi said. "What alternative is there?"

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