Encountering the Church in the Middle East

STAFF REPORT

The Wiseman Forum

Whether it’s on television, in the newspaper or on social media, we are flooded with images and headlines about what is happening in the Middle East. From April 30-May 1, First Presbyterian Church hosted a special Wiseman Forum series to look beyond the media - and ask some important questions about what’s actually going on in the Middle East and how it relates to us as 21st century American Christians.

Special guests, including Dr. Stephen Hoffmann, joined the First Church pastors to share an inside look at the Middle East through personal experiences in Israel, Palestine, and Baghdad with the U.S. Foreign Service Office. Dr. Stephen Hoffmann is also professor emeritus of political science at Taylor University, where he taught a course on the politics and culture of the Middle East.

Along with a basic overview of the region’s rich history, geography and architecture, Dr. Hoffmann expounded upon the variety of people and cultures that shape everyday life. Although many aspects of Middle Eastern culture are not so different from our own, some experiences stand out in stark contrast. In certain regions, Christian worship takes place only under armed guard to ensure the safety of those involved.

Through these personal stories and a collection of vibrant images, those at the Wiseman Forum were challenged to know, respect and understand other religions and cultures.

"It was fascinating to hear about the history and influences from other parts of the world," shared Carly Sullivan Rivers. "I left that first night feeling as if we had barely scratched the surface..."

Through further programming on Sunday morning, Dr. Hoffmann gave insight on "how war and peace are needed to reconcile the values of order and justice" and began unpacking some of the complex issues surrounding Israel and Palestine.

Having come to a better understanding of the Middle East, the Forum participants concluded a full weekend with a clearer idea of how to form an opinion on American foreign policy from a position of faith.

The Church in Lebanon and Syria

Also in May, First Church hosted a Special Wednesday Night Downtown that furthered our discussion about the Middle East. Congregants met in the courtyard for a cookout and fellowship before gathering for a presentation by Co-pastor Ryan Moore on his travels to Lebanon and Syria.

In Lebanon, Ryan joined a team from the Outreach Foundation, which included partners from the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon for a “Consultation on Syria.” Presbyterian pastors shared about their ministry after five years of war, and those in attendance prayed, worshiped and explored how they could be “mutually encouraged by one another’s faith.” (Romans 1:12)
Jesus, you are making me feel a little uncomfortable

How do you feel when things are awkward? I once watched an episode of The Office with Lindsey, my wife, and she could not sit still because the scene being depicted was so uncomfortable. She wanted to turn it off, but also wanted to know how the scene would play out. This is the feeling that I often get when looking at Jesus’ interactions in the Bible.

For instance, we read in Luke 7 about a time when Jesus was Simon’s dinner guest. Suddenly at dinner, a woman with a bad reputation comes in and interrupts the gathering with some conspicuous gratitude. She starts washing Jesus’ feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. That’s a little uncomfortable at dinner, but Jesus has this way of doubling down the discomfort of a situation while also protecting the people who are most vulnerable. So, Jesus asks Simon a hypothetical question: Two people are in debt to a lender, and neither can repay. One owes a large debt while the other owes an astronomical debt. The lender chooses to forgive both debts. Which person loves the lender more? It’s a kind of trap Jesus has set for him, and Simon charges in like a guy who’s never seen a trap before. Simon sets out the grateful love equation: big forgiveness produces big love; little forgiveness produces little love.

Then Jesus tells everyone that in the woman we see big love, which tells us she experienced big forgiveness. Jesus also tells everyone that Simon has shown little love for Jesus, which betrays that Simon has experienced only little forgiveness. And just like that, the trap is sprung; Simon is self-righteous and thankless, the woman is vindicated and forgiven, and everyone else in the room is squirming uncomfortably on the couch with Lindsey as Simon’s heart-level reality is broadcast openly.

Jesus is making normal social occasions like dinner abnormally uncomfortable with unsettling regularity. Remember the blind man who Jesus anointed with his spit? Awkward! There is the time Jesus calls Peter a child of the Devil. What about Jesus breaking quarantine and touching those with leprosy?

One of the things that Jesus is saying to us through all of this social awkwardness is that God is not primarily concerned with comfort. Jesus is trying to push people’s thinking, to stretch people to new levels of honest self-awareness and ultimately, to set people free. Just as with Simon, Jesus has a kind of clarity about each one of us, desiring that in his light we would each see ourselves more clearly. While it can be awkward and uncomfortable, these moments with Jesus are clearly. While it can be awkward and uncomfortable, these moments with Jesus are also invitations to embrace a new perspective and see things not previously noticed.

I like to think that Simon was changed by that uncomfortable meeting with Jesus. I imagine that Luke, the reporter gathering the source materials, sat in Simon’s house to hear his story. Maybe Simon pointed to the other side of the room, to the very place where the woman had washed Jesus’ feet, and explained how on that day the penny finally dropped. Suddenly Simon had come to see that he and the sinful woman were not very different, that neither of them could pay their debt and that both had been freely forgiven. Maybe he stopped thinking of his debt in contrast to another person and frankly acknowledged his powerless inability to repay. One evening with Jesus and suddenly Simon was becoming free to be powerless, free to be forgiven and free to really love God.

This is just like Jesus. He will come and make us uncomfortable, because what Jesus really desires for us is freedom. Freedom from darkness and lies, freedom from comfortable half-truths and gimmicks, freedom from our well-worn paths and familiar habits of heart and mind. As we move into the summer, I encourage you to welcome Jesus, through the scripture, to make things a little uncomfortable. When Jesus brings truth, grace comes along hand-in-hand. In Sunday school ask, where does the scripture make us uncomfortable? In your personal devotions ask, is there something in this text that makes me squirm a bit? Is there a hard truth in this text, and how is Jesus trying to set us free? For whom the son sets free is free indeed.

—Rev. James Estes, Associate Pastor

SAVE THE DATE

Wednesday Night Downtown Special Events

Join us for food, fellowship, and unique summer offerings:

June 15
July 20
August 17

Stay tuned for more details.
Wambugu Gachungi, designated associate pastor

STAFF REPORT

The Designated Associate Pastor Nominating Committee extended a call to Wambugu Gachungi to provide leadership to TIF and its many programs and ministries. The congregation approved the call on Sunday, May 8. Wambugu will be ordained and installed as the new designated associate pastor at 11:00 on June 12.

Wambugu was born in Nyeri, Central Kenya (East Africa). In 1995 Wambugu graduated with a diploma in Theology from East Africa School of Theology. He relocated to the United States for further studies in 2001. He was admitted to Arlington Bible College, and in 2003 he transferred to the University of the Ozarks where he graduated with a BA in Philosophy and Religion, with a Minor in Sociology in 2007. He was then admitted to Phillips Theological Seminary where he graduated with Master of Divinity in 2010. He is currently completing a Doctor of Ministry degree at Phillips Seminary.

After graduating from East Africa School of Theology, he was employed by the Presbyterian Church of East Africa as an evangelist. In 1996 he was ordained as Ruling Elder and served the church until 2001 when he relocated. He joined First Church, Tulsa, in 2007 as a Seminary intern.

While Wambugu was in seminary, he felt called to reach out to the international community in Tulsa. “I felt in my heart that God was calling me to take care of His sheep who were scattered without a shepherd.” Wambugu’s family opened their home for fellowship on Fridays and any other time when the community needed a place to meet. “We realized that the community needed a place that they could call home away from home.” Their home became a home of fellowship and “swallowship” for the community.

Wambugu is married to Faith Wambugu (currently a student at Phillips Seminary pursuing her Master of Ministry and Culture) and they are blessed with two children, Spurgeon and Vivien. Faith, Spurgeon, and Vivien are active members of FPC. They have contributed immensely to the growth of TIF. When Vivien was asked to describe their family, she said that she couldn’t think of anything else but a “prayerful and playful family.” Spurgeon expressed “Everything we have is about church and for church. What is not for church in this house, from clothes, food, pots, house, cars … even us! Ha!” There are no better words to describe Wambugu’s family. “As family, we feel honored to be called to share our gifts in advancing the Kingdom of God in this community. It is our prayer that the FPC family will experience the global Church here in Tulsa and abroad.”

“We sincerely appreciate the journey of faith walked together, with the help of the FPC family, Welch family, Ministers, TIF Community, friends, and family, whose arms of love never ceased embracing us, in times of difficulties and joys. It is by the grace of God that we have come this far. We can’t wait to see what the Lord has for us in the next chapter of life. Praise the Lord!”

Please join us on June 12 at 11:00 a.m. in the Sanctuary for a special service of worship and celebration, as Pastor Wambugu is ordained and installed as the new designated associate pastor. A reception will be held in Stephenson Hall following 11:00 a.m. worship.
It was a rainy afternoon on Sunday, April 17, but “heaven came down and glory filled our souls” just the same. Backed by a 23-piece professional orchestra, First Church’s 60-voice choir led by our favorite organist and choir director, Ronald J. Pearson, began its annual spring concert with Missa Festiva by John Leavitt. The 13-minute piece begins with a plea for mercy in “Kyrie,” finds us proclaiming our faith mid-stream with “Credo” and ends with the promises of “Agnus Dei,” which reminds us that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, has taken away our sin. Praise His name!

Following the stirring “O Divine Word Above” by Gabriel Faure, the choir was privileged to present John Rutter’s Feel the Spirit. Throughout this seven-piece spiritual, we were blessed to have the engaging soprano and longtime FPC member, Judith Raiford who serves as assistant professor of music in voice at the University of Tulsa. Both of Judith’s college-age children, Abby and Will, sing in FPC’s choir and joyfully added their voices to this event.

Well-known Tulsa organist and choir director, Dr. Michael Bedford, who is also a friend and colleague of Ron, accepted our challenge to create an original musical composition. “I was both honored and delighted,” shared Dr. Bedford before presenting the anthem. He explained that he often receives commissions with little to no guidance, but that this project began with a very clear goal. The planning committee had already “zeroed in on the text from 2 Corinthians 5:17-10, which beautifully signifies Jim’s transition into a new creation in Christ. As a further tribute to Jim and his lifelong work with children, they requested that a portion of the anthem be assigned to an optional children’s choir.”

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After several months of conversations and much prayer, “The New Creation” was born. Planning, practicing and performing the anthem as a surprise encore turned into quite the clandestine affair for this bunch of parishioners. Ron’s friend and associate, Mr. Bruce Wilkin, arranged for the choir to rehearse in the basement of the First Baptist Church, and he also secretly made his way to FPC’s organ to practice the piece undetected. “I felt like a criminal breaking into the church!” Wilkin said, explaining how he carefully noted all of the organ’s settings so he could leave everything exactly the way he found it.

Despite several close calls, everyone successfully surprised Mr. Pearson, who, often to the choir’s chagrin, is uncannily omniscient! Together with his wife, Joanne and daughter, Mary Beth, he was able to sit in the front row and enjoy the new anthem. The excitement in the Sanctuary was almost palpable as the entire audience got to experience the choir’s love and devotion for their beloved director and his family.

“It was a total surprise and I was very touched and moved by the idea of a commissioned anthem … in memory of my brother,” said Ron. “He would have appreciated it very much. It was also a special gift since it was written by a good friend of mine who I’ve known and respected for many years.”

Spirits were high at the evening’s end, and the choir concluded tired and extremely thankful that “He’s got the whole world in His hands.” Soli Deo Gloria!
Exodus pilgrimage to the Holy Land

LIZZY BRADFORD

This spring break, a group of 13 high school students from the Exodus youth group had the opportunity to travel to Israel on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I was blessed to join them as one of five adult leaders who went on the trip.

There were two separate and wonderful things that we experienced in Israel. The first—and probably the most obvious—experience was the land. Through it we encountered our faith in a whole new way as we experienced the geography and history of Biblical times.

The second way was more subtle, but in my opinion just as impactful: God placed blessings around us in the form of locations we visited and people we met along the way.

The Exodus students actually started preparing for their trip long before they ever left the airport. In January, they began a weekly class focusing on the history, geography and Biblical perspective of Israel. While building relationships together, the students and leaders learned more about the meaning of a Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

As part of their preparation, the group was encouraged to experience Israel as the “fifth gospel of Christ.” The students and leaders studied the four written gospels before the trip, and once in Israel, they were given the opportunity to experience the life of Christ in a tangible way. There, the group received daily devotionals that directly coincided with the walk of Christ and how it was connected to what they would experience. The group began each day with reading the gospel passages and took the words of the gospel writers throughout the day as they experienced the sights and locations in real life.

Many families had concerns about the conflict in Israel and the Middle East prior to departure, and we were all very mindful of the cultural differences amongst the people of Israel. Despite the reports of conflict, the group was blessed to experience a land more united than the news portrayed.

The people we met and the stories we heard were of cooperation—the people of Israel and Palestine overcoming their differences to attempt to live in peace. One incredible witness of peace was when our Israeli Jewish tour guide, our Arab Muslim bus driver and our Palestinian Christian day guide all enjoyed a meal together in laughter.

It’s impossible to pick any one experience that defined this incredible pilgrimage to Israel. Every person was moved in different ways and challenged in different capacities. Some were struck by the beauty of the land, others by experiencing the places we know Christ carried out his ministry on Earth. For me, the experience was shaped by the people I traveled with and met all along the way.

I encourage you to find a student that went on the trip to Israel and ask them to share at least one incredible moment about their pilgrimage. Thank you for your prayers and support before and during our travels.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Ryan shared how he asked the young pastors with families why they chose to stay in the wake of such destruction. They replied, “Because we have hope. We have Jesus. This is where the Lord has called us.” In Damascus, people are still preaching fearlessly in the name of Jesus just like in Acts 9:27.

In Syria, Ryan and these Presbyterian pastors traveled on the same roads Jesus would have walked 2000 years ago. Christians have been in that region a long time, and despite unimaginable obstacles and circumstances, they continue to thrive and faithfully serve as the Church.

The team was also able to visit several refugee schools. Allowing the Syrian children to keep up with their education is just one of the ways that the Church is creating hope. Gifts of food, clothing and medicine are important, but the Church also views education as a key part of providing a better future for refugee families.

Along with two pilgrimages to Israel this spring (see above), both the Wiseman Forum and Ryan’s presentation helped our congregation keep a finger on the pulse of the Church in the Middle East. First Church leadership continues to explore what an ongoing relationship with our Middle Eastern brothers and sisters might look like. “Let’s join together in prayer and think about how we can support the Church in this part of the world,” challenged Ryan.

To learn more about the Outreach Foundation and their ongoing activities, visit their website at theoutreachfoundation.org.
Since 2012, the First Church congregation has gathered every Sunday in June to experience something special. One at a time, members take the podium at the front of Kerr Chapel and share a story—their story, a personal testimony of God’s work in their lives, an Autobiography of Grace.

The stories are touching, often punctuated with tears and even rich laughter, as with George Savage’s Autobiography in 2015, which included many humorous anecdotes from his youth, like how he and a friend would skip Sunday school to go buy ice cream “with the Lord’s money.”

Many Autobiographies present a glimpse into different cultural backgrounds, as with TIF member Patrick Cheptiony, who described how he once faced a charging buffalo where he grew up in Nairobi, Kenya.

“This has been such a great spiritual exercise just to reflect on the Lord’s work during my journey,” shared Lori Kanitz about her Autobiography in 2014.

Audio and video recordings of past Autobiographies of Grace are available on the church website at firstchurchtulsa.org, and all are invited to come to this year’s presentations, every Sunday morning in June at 9:30 a.m. in Kerr Chapel.

Almost 60 years ago, First Presbyterian Church acquired property on West 71st Street formerly known as “Camp Parthenia,” Tulsa’s first YWCA camp. The church changed its name to Camp Loughridge, in honor of Robert M. Loughridge, one of the first Presbyterian missionaries to travel into the unknown territory of Oklahoma to share the gospel with the Creek Indian Nation.

Like its namesake, Camp Loughridge was intended to be a special place—a point of intersection where Tulsans of all ages could encounter the living God in a unique beautiful outdoor environment.

After several decades of successful camp life, Camp Loughridge was chartered as a new non-profit organization. While now independent from First Presbyterian Church, the mission remains the same, and the congregation remains closely tied with the camp through frequent use of the facilities and ongoing support.

This year, Camp Loughridge’s summer day camps again offer campers and counselors alike a natural way to experience Christian growth.

Day camps begin the second week in June for children ages 7 to 15. Hiking, canoeing, archery, zip lines, a ropes course, swimming and team sports are all part of the “classic day camp” fun at Loughridge, which is located in the Tulsa Hills area on 188 beautifully wooded acres.

Day camp is for ages 7 to 12 and designed for kids who want the excitement of summer camp with the ease of sleeping at home each night. Ages 13 to 15 spend half their time as campers and the other half as Counselors in Training (“CITs”).

As part of a “Mission Quest” theme, campers work together to achieve adventurous mission objectives as they discover, grow and experience God together.

Pricing ranges from $230-$250 per week. Teens in the CIT program receive a 50% discount.

Camp Loughridge also is looking for people who are interested in teaching, coaching or social or spiritual work to serve as full- and part-time counselors this summer. Candidates should love the outdoors and working with kids. Their job is to promote courage, self-discipline, responsibility, respect, perseverance, cultural sensitivity and friendship.

Register for summer camp and learn more at camploughridge.org or call 918-446-4194 for details.
One of the most painful dynamics of substance abuse is how it impacts every area of relationship. Addiction doesn’t just damage addicts, it damages an addict’s family as well. As an addict moves through cycles of shame, resentment, self-pity, worry and anger, these same emotions are experienced throughout the family. The stress of addiction can cause every fault line to produce earthquakes. Members of the family besides the addict can find themselves in conflict with one another, feeling jealous and impatient, even becoming verbally or physically violent when life feels out of control. It is not uncommon for the stresses of addiction to contribute to broken relationships at every level of family life. Unfortunately, many families do not seek outside help until these divisions have grown deeply painful.

Families are understood to go through four stages before reaching out for help. The first stage is concern in which the family recognizes addictive behaviors and tries to help the addict. These attempts at help often seek a quick fix that will get things “back to normal.” The second stage is denial, during which family members try to maintain life as usual. This “life as usual” approach often includes lying about the addict’s behavior, and carries the feeling of a cover-up conspiracy. The whole family is in on the lie that “things are fine.” The third stage is adaptation, in which the family tries to change or control the addict by taking on new roles and responsibilities. Family members may feel their job is to be positive and project a happy face to those outside the family. All of this change and struggle for control begins to strain relationships, and often members of the family are pitted against one another as blame shifts from person to person. This leads to the fourth stage, exhaustion. The gig is up. Finally someone in the exhausted family admits that they are powerless and that life has become unmanageable. It will require a power greater than the family to restore them to sanity. While this is the final stage in recognizing the need for recovery, it is at once the first step toward a future of promise and hope. The divine promise borne in the humble.

Faith Partners Column: Substance abuse: a family affair

REV. JAMES ESTES
Summer Sunday Offerings

Summer programming begins in July!
Sunday Mornings, 9:30-10:30 a.m.

Another World A Mile Away: Navigating Cultural Differences in Tulsa and Around the Globe
Increase your knowledge and understanding of people in various cultures, races, and socioeconomic classes so that we might be more effective in serving the kingdom.

Listen to expert speakers educate on concepts, statistics, and effective methods of building relationships. Hear from FPC members speaking about practical experiences they have had in some of our mission endeavors.

Combined Class for Parents of Young Children: hosted by the Covenanters, Faith & Family, and Upper Room.

Form new friendships, strengthen old ones, and spend time discussing the intersection of life and faith.

Learn more at firstchurchtulsa.org or by calling Gretchen at 918-301-1019.

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June 30 - Blueberry Picking at Thunderbird Berry Farms
July 7  - Tulsa Zoo
July 14 - Tulsa Botanical Garden
July 21 - Tulsa Children’s Museum
July 28 - River Country Water Park, Muskogee, OK

For times and details check firstchurchtulsa.org
email LBaird@firstchurchtulsa.org
or call Laurel Baird at 918.301.1009

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Summer Sunday Offerings

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