

A Visit to Iran **Clark Berge SSF**

What do you want for your birthday?"

"I want to go to Iran," I replied. My family wasn't sure it was such a good idea; but I have always wanted to go on a peace mission. It seemed like an appropriate way to celebrate a milestone and enrich my life experience. The Fellowship of Reconciliation sends four delegations a year to Iran; most Americans who travel there go with FOR (only 300-500 a year are permitted into the country each year). The December 2008 ten-day trip was the eighth delegation.



We were an interfaith group and our purpose was interfaith dialogue. The trip was co-sponsored by Shomer Shalom, a Jewish peace group. We were ten Jews and four Christians; six prospective members of the delegation (including some Muslims) were denied visas. Our hosts were from the government's Department of Education, the Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue. They planned our itinerary, made all arrangements and

helped us in innumerable ways. They were also to listen to our conversations and record our meetings.

Even with government hosts, plans changed in the blink of an eye. We were asked to be flexible, and for the most part I was happy to let somebody else struggle with the details of travel in a group. It freed us up to pursue our unofficial agenda: to meet as many local people as we possibly could.

It was a relief albeit a bit humiliating that many, many people spoke some English. I could barely get out "salaam", though some members of the delegation picked up quite a bit of Farsi. The people we met were eager to talk, and these unofficial conversations were as far ranging and intimate as our official talks were formal and cautious. We wanted to know about the role of women in Iran, what it is like in Iran on a day to day basis, and to learn about Shi'ite Islam. Our civilian diplomacy was characterized by remarkable cordiality. Learning we were Americans they would say, "We love Americans!" Many tried to distance themselves from the official rhetoric of the President of Iran, insisting they only want peace and the freedom to live the way they want. Significantly they stressed that they have chosen their way of life and valued their Islamic Republic. "Please, don't bomb us!" they would plead. The only war they've fought is a defensive war against Iraq which attacked with American supplied military equipment. I'd forgotten Saddam Hussein was once an American ally in our struggle to protect our oil supplies. Iran fears a "shock and awe" campaign.

We travelled by bus from Tehran to Qom, Estefan, Persepolis and Shiraz. We met several Ayatollahs, visited the Jewish synagogues in Tehran and Shiraz, met the Armenian Orthodox Archbishop and marvelled at the crowds thronging the mosques, and especially the young people who gathered at the tomb of Hafez in Shiraz. Iranians love poetry; they quote it, refer to it and the tomb of one of their greatest poets is a gathering place for young people. It is a bit like speed dating. They meet reciting poetry and then walk around the garden under the watchful eye of the morality police. But nothing can truly suppress the desire of young people to meet.

There really are morality police. They ensure women cover their heads and dress modestly. Men too must not wear shorts. There is no touching of the opposite sex in public. Our female delegates had to wear the hijab, the head covering. We were all curious about their reactions to it: hot, uncomfortable, but neither did they experience any kind of harassment. A first for many of our young female delegates in a large city.

While the Iranian constitution protects the rights of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, even giving them representation in parliament, Shi'ite Islam is the dominant influence and brand of Islam followed in Iran. They are attracted to large festivals and practice hospitality with great diligence - platters of sweets and fruits and endless cups of tea and cold drinks were offered to us at every place we visited. In Shiraz we were able to join in the Friday evening prayers. The women donned huge lacy flower-spangled shawls. The men went to a different part of the mosque, where we sat, knelt or stood as we wished. Worshippers smiled at us. Some appeared very devout; other young men would interrupt their prayers to check their cell phones.

A culture that requires flexibility and prizes poetry has some real attraction for me. The beautiful mosques, palaces and gardens elicited gasps of astonishment. The welcome and generosity challenged my prejudices; I met them as fellow human beings. Civilian diplomacy is all about telling stories, trying to put a human face on "the other." It was a great joy to find such a lovely face. Few of us are in positions of power or able to direct the course of events. But we can take responsibility for examining our assumptions and learning as much as we can about other people, other religions. It doesn't mean we wish to be like them, only that we respect their right to be themselves and recognize them as part of the beautiful human family.

The Armenian Orthodox archbishop reminded us that evangelism is not "telling my neighbours that their religion is wrong and they must agree with me." Rather it is about serving the poor, the sick, the people in need. "In this way," he said, " we promote our faith and live by its highest principles." *F*

