

# Area church group embarks on journey to the Holy Land

by Allison Lindgren

"I walked today where Jesus walked, in days of long ago. I wandered down each path He knew with reverent step and slow."

The lyrics to this song came to mind as I sat in Paul Backstrom's office at Precision Ag Results in Maddock, watching him scroll through pictures of his recent trip to Israel. He and his wife Donna were part of a group of 19 people who traveled from their small church in Esmond and their partner church, Bethel Free Church in Devils Lake. They flew out of Winnipeg on March 2 and arrived in Tel Aviv after a very long flight. When they arrived in Jerusalem, although they hadn't really slept yet, they immediately started touring. For half the group, this was their first trip to Israel, but for the other half it was a return trip to see things they missed the first time.

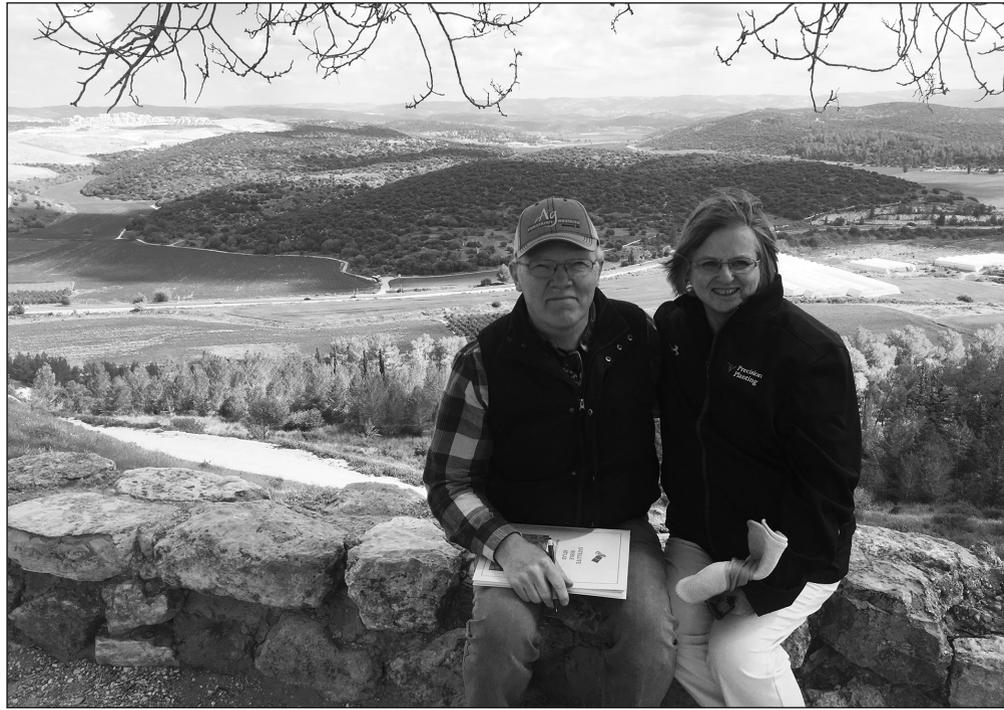
Backstrom said the group spent the first five days in Israel, staying within the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. The advantage to staying in the Old City is the feel of the rhythms and sounds of this extraordinary place—the calls to prayer and the ringing of bells from the city's ancient churches. In the morning, the bazaars come to life and then slowly close down again for the night. In the Old City, there are no high-rise luxury hotels, just a few moderately priced hotels and hostels. These are things that you'd never see staying in the New City.

Jerusalem has been a holy city for 3,000 years, and is a place of spiritual significance for all three major religions of the Western world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the past 150 years, Jerusalem has slowly expanded from a mysterious and charismatic walled city to a modern metropolis that spreads across the surrounding hills.

Jerusalem's sacred sites are filled with meaning. In the Old City's bazaars, tourists are awestruck by the golden Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, overwhelmed by the site of the Crucifixion and rendered speechless by Yad VaShem, the memorial and museum dedicated to the six million Jews who fell victim to the Nazis.

Backstrom said that five days within the Old City seemed like a long time, but there is just so much to see. The wall itself was built by Herod the Great, the Roman King of Judea circa 20 BC. Inside the wall is the Temple Mount and the Wailing Wall, also built by Herod. The places he spoke of were so familiar from Biblical references; Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Mount of Olives, Gethsemane, Golgotha and the Garden Tomb.

Among the most famous of Jesus' miracles is recounted in John chapter 5, where Jesus healed the paralytic at the Bethesda Pool. There was a belief at the time that when the waters at the Bethesda Pool were troubled, the first person into the water



Paul Backstrom and his wife Donna sit above the Valley of Daniel and Goliath on their trip to Israel.

would be healed. The Bethesda Pool now is believed to have been a complex site; it appears to have been a mikveh, or ritual bath. As the spot of one of Jesus' miracles, the Bethesda Pool was built over in subsequent periods with chapels and churches that are still visible today.

When Backstrom spoke about the Wailing Wall, he said the height of the wall was impressive as it is a massive structure. What impressed him even more was that the wall extended about one-and-a-half times its size underground.

Backstrom said that many of the ancient Biblical sites were located in hills which were fortified and equipped with water supply, gates, high walls and other protection measures. When there was a threat or war the population centered in the city and defended themselves behind the walls. There are hundreds of Tels like these in Israel and throughout the Middle East. Their sizes ranged from small (like Tel Par) and others that are quite large (like Tel Megiddo). The original city was a natural hill, which was located on a highly defensible location such as the crossing of a river or beside a major road. The location would have been reinforced by raising the slopes with earth and then building high walls with fieldstones or sun-dried mud bricks. After a war, if a city was leveled by fire or destruction, the first level would have been created. After this destruction, a new city was reconstructed on top of this layer.

This cycle would repeat again and again.

The Tels are actually made out of a number of layers of construction that accumulated over the years, after each layer was grazed or burned down by conquering armies. At a rate of destruction every 100 years or so, many layers accumulated, and the height of the hill grew from one layer to the next. The sites were built over and over again since there was an advantage to continue to revive the ruined city in its original location.

Under the ruins of the city, all the building blocks were available: the heavy blocks were not required to be hauled away for long distance, the water works were available and required only a repair. The older city was usually built on prime locations, so there was no sense in relocating the city. The walls were built to last and were available for the next layer. One of the best defense measures was to raise the height of the city as much as possible, using a vast amount of soil.

Backstrom visited Tel Megiddo, which had 28 cities built one on top of the other. Some Tels would reach 20-30 layers over the 25 centuries. Archaeologists can later excavate the remains along the cut wall to examine the stones, ceramics, bones and coins and read them like a history book.

It is impossible to tell all the stories, as Backstrom said they visited many, many sites in the 13 days they were there. The archaeology is something that seems to fascinate Backstrom as he showed pictures of the pillars and stones that were included in the building of the walls and structures.

These stones, that could weigh up to 2,000 pounds, were put into place and fit perfectly, requiring no mortar or heavy equipment like we use today.

The pictures Backstrom shared bore testimony to Israel's war torn past. The gates were built at a right angle, specifically so that the battering ram wouldn't be able to push through the gate. Modern remnants of bullets mark the walls, attesting to the wars Israel has endured.

Israel is a country less than one-fifth of the size of North Dakota, with a population of about 8 million people. However, in 2015 alone, Israel had 3.5 million tourists visit. Backstrom laughed though, when he spoke about the American influence on Israel. As they drove through Tel Aviv, there were buildings with huge Coca-Cola banners on them, maybe 14 to 15 stories high. It's very easy to buy a Coke or to eat at McDonalds.

Since the country is so small in area, they were able to travel much of it, visiting the Jordan River, the Dead Sea, the Sea of Galilee, the Mediterranean Sea and several of the National Parks such as Herodion, Ce-searea, Masada and Beit She'an.

One of the National Parks they visited was Herodion, one of Herod the Great's most ambitious building projects. It served the Judean King as a summer palace, fortress, monument, burial ground and district capital circa 37 – 4 BC. Of all the sites built by the "builder-king," Herodion is the only one that bears his name.

The immense Herodion complex, near Bethlehem, was built between 23 and 20 BC. It was divided into two sections: Upper Herodion, which contained the palace set within a circular fortress on an artificial cone-shaped mountain and Lower Herodion at the base of the mountain, which consisted of numerous palace annexes used by the king's family and friends, and for the central offices of the district capital.

When asked about a highlight of the trip, Backstrom shared the story about how their daughter Kimberly, who lives in Poland, coordinated with other members of the group to surprise her parents and spend part of the trip with them. They kept the secret and she was able to spend Friday, Saturday and Sunday with them before leaving again.

He laughed as he showed me a picture of the Shabat (Sabbath) elevator. For traditional Jews, it would be a violation of the Sabbath to push an elevator button on Friday night or Saturday. To circumvent this, there are Shabat elevators – which are set to automatically stop at every floor. That way, you are not actually doing the work of pushing the button – and you can feel good about not having violated the Sabbath.