Have you heard the one about the rabbi, the priest and the Muslim leader who flew to the Holy Land?

Well this is no joke. A local multifaith group recently visited Israel, where we toured sites dating back thousands of years while immersed in the realities of life in contemporary Israel. Superbly hosted by Jewish Federation of Reading President Bill Franklin, ours was an interfaith mission or pilgrimage, with Catholic, Muslim, Protestant and Jewish participants. It was not unusual to visit a synagogue, mosque and church in close proximity to one another.

A pilgrimage differs from a tourist trip, as I learned from Alvernia’s Franciscan Sisters when their long-ago inauguration gift sent Helen and me for a week in St. Francis’ hometown of Assisi. Reflection and prayer are interspersed with sightseeing; lectures cover religious beliefs and practices as well as history. And one has the opportunity to experience the spirituality of place. Overlooking the Sea of Galilee, I listened as never before to the Beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

A highlight was our communal prayer gatherings: a Shabbat ritual at the Western Wall, led by Rabbi Brian Michelson, followed by Shabbat supper in an Orthodox home; a reflection on Muslim devotions by Elsayed Elmarzouky in the White Mosque at Nazareth; an evening Mass later that day, led by Monsignor Tom Orsulak. We heard the Scriptures read in Hebrew, learned the parallels between Muslim prayer beads and the Catholic rosary and experienced the similar blessing of bread and wine in the Eucharistic and Shabbat services. It seemed only natural that what tradition has identified as King David’s tomb is located in the floor below the room believed to be the location of the Last Supper and Pentecost.
Our experience was, of course, not typical of daily life in Israel, where religious, cultural and national identities are dizzying in their complexity and contentious in their definition. While a small minority in the West Bank, where most residents are Arab Muslims, Jews constitute more than two-thirds of Israel's population, joined by Arab Israelis, most of them Muslim, with small numbers of Arab Christians, non-Arab Christians and Druze.

Most Jews and Arabs live (and attend schools) segregated from one another, and intercultural knowledge is minimal, according to our guest lecturers. Jews from the Reform and Conservative traditions are themselves minorities within a country embedded in the multidimensional Orthodox tradition, though paradoxically 42 percent identify as secular. Christians are a tiny minority, though it seems natural that their holiest site in Jerusalem, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, is delicately managed by negotiations among six denominations, each with its own altar.

Viewing the "security" or "separation" wall between Jerusalem and the West Bank (identified according to the commentator's perspective) or standing on the Golan Heights overlooking Syria and Lebanon, we understood why our guest commentators are not optimistic that respectful dialogue will become the norm. But they expressed hope, if not about peace, then at least for the absence of war.

And there are inspirational stories. We met a courageous teenager, the last of 1,500 Syrian refugees who temporarily escaped the civil war, aided by the Israeli military, to receive sophisticated medical treatment at a hospital where Jewish and Arab medical staff work side by side. We visited schools where diverse students study and provide community service together in equally diverse neighborhoods. A charismatic graffiti artist walked us through the neighborhood where a large artists' community creatively expresses disparate political perspectives. And on our last day, after visiting the hall where the State of Israel was announced in 1948, a transplanted New Yorker led us through textual analysis of the Israeli Declaration of Independence. While the Holy Land has existed for centuries, Israel is celebrating only its 70th birthday.

Our pilgrimage was an inspirational reminder that, at a time when divisive voices too often dominate, each of us has the opportunity to embark on a journey of exploration and mutual understanding in search of shared values. That we returned to the horrors of Pittsburgh made us even more determined to battle hatred and promote dialogue through Common Heart and other local interfaith efforts.