



## MCC delegates discuss trip to Iran

By **TARA LAYNE**

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— When a group sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee left for a two-week learning tour to Iran on Dec. 28, they weren't sure what to expect.

"I'd had some exposure to Iranians, but I expected we would experience at least some degree of unfriendliness, possibly hostility," James Cooper, one of the group members, said. "That was completely shattered."

Cooper, a Bloomington resident, joined others who went on the trip — including Goshen residents Bertha Beachy and Gwen Gustafson-Zook — in sharing their trip experiences Monday at The Depot in Goshen, just hours after arriving home.

While Cooper said the group did not encounter any form of hostility, "People asked us over and over why the U.S. and Christians hated them," he said. Once the group members told the Iranian people that they wanted peace and good relations between the two countries, the Iranians appeared moved and some even teared up, Cooper said.

Gustafson-Zook said she was fascinated to walk on ancient ground written about in the Old Testament, and it made her realize how young the United States is as a country.

She recalled a special time when the group gathered with Iranian people and sang what Mennonites know as No. 606 (Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow.)

"Not only was it O.K., it was welcome," she said. The Iranians were also present as the group sang "Come Walk With Us, the Journey is Long," which Gustafson-Zook indicated was appropriate for the situation.

"The journey of understanding is long," she said. "It takes effort, but it can be done."

Bertha Beachy spent 25 years in Africa relating to Muslims (20 years as an English teacher), which is why she was so interested in going on the trip.

"I found it amazing the openness they had," she said. "It is important to have an exchange and the opportunity for dialogue."

Beachy said that as she hears the rhetoric increasing in America, she hopes that those who went on the trip can convey the openness that they experienced in Iran.

"At 76, I would do it again," she said.

Wally Shellenberger, a Paoli resident who went on the trip with his wife, Evelyn, said that unfortunately, Americans have been "bombarded with disinformation" about Iran and the Iranian people.

"Iranians had nothing to do with 9/11," he said. "How in the world does the media and our government manage to link this stuff to Iran?" he asked.

"That is not to say they are not capable of it. If we were to send missiles into Iran . . . we could turn many friends into enemies," he said.

"The U.S. has a huge self-interest of defusing this culture of fear that we live with," Shellenberger said.

Gustafson-Zook shared Shellenberger's sentiments.

"I think all Congresspeople should be required to visit the country they want to bomb before they bomb it," she said. Once the people of that country become your friends, there would be a lot less bombs dropped, she

said.

All members of the group indicated that they would be interested in talking with local Congress representatives about the trip and experiences.

“What we experienced was only part of the picture,” Gustafson Zook said. “But we would want to paint the picture we saw so our elected officials can benefit.”

In addition to Beachy and Gustafson-Zook, Goshen residents David Cortright and Goshen College students Paul Shetler and Rebecca Fast went on the trip.

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