

## Faculty Delegation Takes Interfaith Trip to Turkey

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The rich culture, history, and landscape of Turkey were experienced through the eyes of University of St. Thomas administrators and faculty from across the disciplines ranging from theology and international studies to business and education. The group of 13 made the 10-day journey to Turkey in May, after the University received an invitation from the Houston-based Institute of Interfaith Dialog (IID).

The institute (IID), which promotes interfaith understanding through meetings and cultural activities and is inspired by the ideas of Fethullah Gülen, a contemporary Turkish Muslim scholar, has collaborated with the UST Center for Faith and Culture on a number of projects.

For Dr. Robert LeBlanc, dean of the School of Education, Turkey always ranked high on his list of destinations. He and his wife, Rebecca, were part of the group.

"It was a wonderful experience," LeBlanc said. "The opportunity to go with a group from the University on an interfaith experience and to be guests of the institute was just incredible."

Trip participants also included UST President Dr. Robert Ivany and his wife, Marinanne Ivany; Dr. Nivien Saleh, assistant professor of international studies; Dr. Rogelio Garcia-Contreras, assistant professor of international studies, and his wife, Gabriella Carillo Lacayo; Dr. Linda Pett-Conklin, chair of international studies; Dr. Randall Smith, associate professor of theology and his wife, Tamara Nicholl-Smith; Dr. Maria Aparecida Luchesi Ring, adjunct professor of international studies; Dr. Bahman Mirshab, dean of the Cameron School of Business and Dr. Shahram Taj, chair of marketing and management.

During their visit from May 20-May 30, the UST group spent several days in Istanbul and visited other sites around the country including the ruins of the ancient city of Ephesus in Izmir; Urfa, the legendary birthplace of Abraham and Cappadocia, an area where volcanic deposits of soft rocks were carved out to form houses, churches and monasteries, including Goreme, a monastic center from 300 to 1200 AD.

"Cappadocia is the most stunningly beautiful, unique geological area with an incredible history," LeBlanc said. "We took a hot air balloon ride, and it was wonderful to see the unique landscape on a perfectly clear early morning."

LeBlanc also pointed out the connections between UST and the 4th century theologian, St. Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia. The University was founded by Basilian fathers and is also home to the Chapel of St. Basil.

"It was a thoughtful connection for them to make," he said.

"They sponsor groups to Turkey so people can understand the culture and see that it is a secular, though predominantly Muslim, country, steeped in both European and Middle Eastern values," LeBlanc said.

During their visit, the group also visited a university, a newspaper, a hospital and several schools and had dinner with host families.

To Dr. Randall Smith, associate professor of theology, meeting and talking with the Turkish people was a special part of the visit, as was standing in the ruins of Ephesus, where St. Paul visited and preached.

"For me, since I learn most from visiting and talking to people, the home visits and talking to Turkish people on the streets were the best learning experiences," Smith said.

Visiting other parts of Turkey, such as Cappadocia and Urfa, 30 miles from the Syrian border, made Dr. Rogelio Garcia-Contreras's visit to Turkey even more fascinating. An associate professor in the UST's Center for International Studies, Garcia-Contreras believes that it's important for professors who deal with international relations in the classroom to observe life in other countries.

"We dedicate our lives to understanding world politics," he said. "It's important to erase misconceptions."

LeBlanc, who praised the hospitality of their Turkish hosts, looks forward to continued interfaith dialogue with the institute and hopes to explore student exchanges and a study abroad program in Turkey.

Pictured at top from left to right: Dr. Robert LeBlanc, Dr. Bahman Mirshab, Dr. Randall Smith, Tamara Nicholl-Smith, Dr. Nivien Saleh, Can Dogan, Maria Aparecida Luchesi Ring, Linda Pett-Conklin, Herkan Kurt, Dr. Rebecca LeBlanc, Marianne Ivany, Dr. Robert Ivany, Gabriela Constanza Carillo Lacayo and Dr. Rogelio Garcia-Contreras. Rebecca and Robert LeBlanc are shown on a hot air balloon ride. International studies faculty Garcia-Contreras, Luchesi Ring, Pett-Conklin, and Saleh.

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The Institute of Interfaith Dialog (IID) grew out of the need to address the question, "How can citizens of the world live in peace and harmony?" The Institute was established in 2002 as a 501-c-3 non-profit educational organization by Turkish-Americans and their friends. The Institute aims to eliminate or reduce false stereotypes, prejudices and unjustified fears through direct human communication. Toward these goals the Institute organizes academic and grass roots activities such as conferences, panels, symposia, interfaith family dinners and cultural exchange trips. Many participants of the Institute's activities are inspired by the discourse and pioneering dialogue initiatives of the Turkish Muslim scholar, writer and educator Fethullah Gulen . Headquartered in Houston, Texas, the Institute has branch offices in five states and representatives throughout the South-Central United States.