

Striking a note for Mideast peace

Israel-bound local Mennonites won't be put off by violence, danger

BY CAROL COOPER
Special

Letitia Wise is spending her second wedding anniversary on Israel's West Bank.

Her husband won't be with her, but while there she will be deepening her commitment to their marriage.

Along with Markham resident Heather Steckle, Ms Wise of Newmarket will be part of a 12-member delegation from Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) headed for Hebron, Bethlehem and Jerusalem late in May.

Ms Wise and Ms Steckle are parishioners of the Rouge Valley Mennonite Church. Associate pastor of the church, Pieter Niemeyer of Mount Albert, heads the group. Each delegate pays \$2,700 for the experience.

For Ms Wise, a Scarborough preschool teacher, serving on the delegation will expose her to a type of work she would like to share with her husband.

"Part of what we want to do as a couple is to be involved with mission work," she said. "My husband knows he likes it, but I'd like to have a foot-wetter before jumping in for a term of a year or more."

Gaining hands-on experience with CPT work is one of the purposes of the delegation, said Mr. Niemeyer, who's preparing for his third trip to the West Bank.

As a CPT reservist, he dedicates one month a year to doing the agency's work overseas as well as volunteering more time at home.

"These delegates are people committed to peace. They want to see how CPT works to determine whether they will also work with the organization in the future."

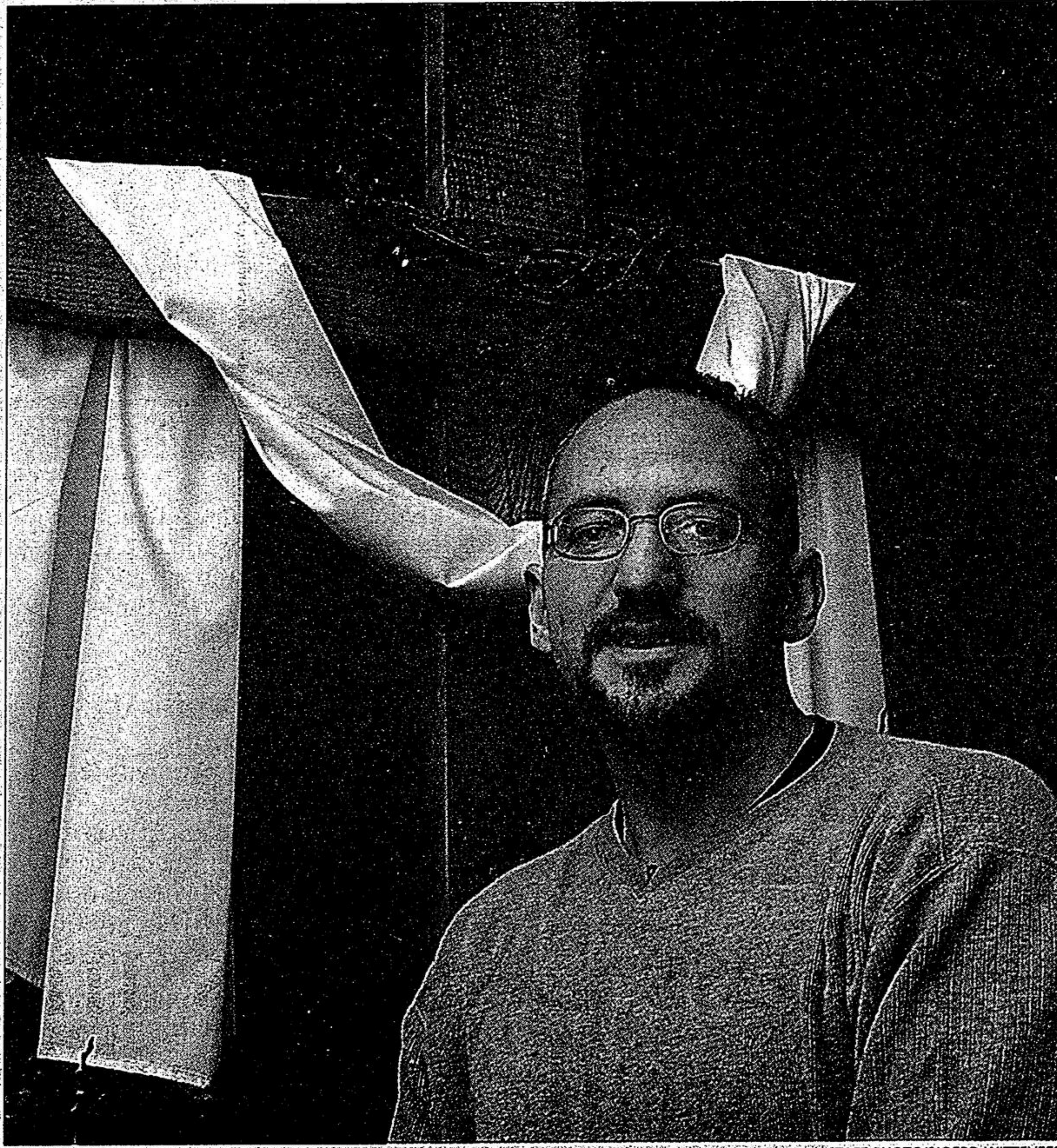
During its 10-day stay in the region, the delegation plans to travel to meet with Palestinian peace activists in Bethlehem, Israeli peace groups in Jerusalem and participate in the work of the full-time CPT team posted in Hebron.

"We're on the side of the peacemakers, both Palestinian and Israeli," said Doug Pritchard, CPT's Canadian co-ordinator.

According to Mr. Pritchard, peace groups from both sides have said the way to ensure peace in the region is to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.

That occupation is illegal under the Geneva Convention and more than 50 U.N. resolutions have called for them to withdraw, he said.

The work of the CPT-Hebron team varies from week to week and could include accompanying



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Pieter Niemeyer is joining a peacemaker team going to Israel in May. He was photographed in the Rouge Valley Mennonite Church on Reesor Road in Markham.

Palestinian children to school, ensuring delivery of water to Palestinian homes or sitting in front of Israeli bulldozers as they attempt to confiscate Palestinian land to expand Jewish settlements, Mr. Pritchard said.

"Our main role is to try and protect ordinary unarmed civilians who are trying to live their lives in the midst of this territory while it's under military occupation," he said.

CPT workers have also ridden the number 13 bus in Jerusalem, one largely used by Israelis and bombed two weekends in a row, and have visited Israeli soldiers in hospital.

The team documents any

human rights violations. They are posted on the CPT website and reported through press releases so those interested can contact politicians and press for change.

The aim is violence reduction, Mr. Pritchard said. "We're not mediators or lawyers. We're attempting to reduce the violence in the streets to give local peacemakers the security and the space they'll need to negotiate a final peace."

A call for a broader commitment to peace was the genesis of Christian Peacemaker Teams. In 1984, theologian and social activist Ron Sider noted to the Mennonite World Conference in France that soldiers

risk their lives for peace and security.

With pacifism as part of the Mennonite tradition, Mr. Sider asked if those attending the conference were willing not only to refrain from fighting, but also to risk their lives to stop warfare.

Formed in 1986 by a joint Canadian-American steering committee as a result of that challenge, CPT now has 125 full- and part-time workers.

When asked, full-time teams maintain a presence in conflict-ridden places around the world.

Mr. Niemeyer, Ms Wise and Ms Steckle all understand the dangers that could befall them. They have

signed a statement of personal responsibility, accepting the risks of being wounded, disabled, killed or taken hostage.

Like the others, Ms Steckle finds strengths in her beliefs.

Said the outdoor education co-ordinator for Willowgrove Farm, "I'm not afraid. Who knows what might happen? I'm secure that if I do die, I get to go to a better place (heaven)."

As an experienced CPT delegate, Mr. Niemeyer is especially aware of the situations they could encounter.

On a previous trip, he saw a journalist being shot in the back of the head with a rubber bullet.

"It goes without saying that there is risk," he said. "But that is not to say we will go blindly into a dangerous situation."

"Our role is not to get ourselves killed. Our role is not to be martyrs. But we cannot allow the fact that there is danger to be the determining factor of our involvement."

Said Mr. Pritchard, "We're there because there is a war on. We're there because we're called to take some risks on the conviction that we are witnesses to a better way of resolving conflict."

On a past delegation, Mr. Niemeyer and two other CPT delegates escorted a 12-year-old Palestinian girl home during a brief lifting of curfew. She had been caught at a relative's house in an Israeli-controlled area for 17 days by a 24-hour-a-day curfew.

That moment stands out for him in his work as a CPT reservist. "To me that's providing security and safety to people," he said.


Both Mr. Niemeyer and his wife, the parents of three young children, believe CPT work is a calling and bad things happen when good people stand by, he said.

Like Mr. Niemeyer's wife, Ms Wise's husband is supportive. He never tried to talk her out of her decision, Ms Wise said.

As well as experiencing mission work, she expects to learn more about a different way of life. "Society here is so me-centred and we're just so involved in our own little world," she said.

Compassion for those living in violent circumstances also motivates Ms Steckle. She has a long-held interest in the Holy Land and her heart goes out to those living there, she said.

For more information about Christian Peacemaker Teams or to help sponsor a delegate, call 416-423-5525.



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