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Community concern
Residents of Dryden, Tompkins County, have formed a special relationship with Michael Rehbein, a 7-year-old parishioner of Holy Cross Church. The courageous youth and his family are coping with a disease known as Rasmussen's Syndrome. Page 7.



AP/Wide World Photos

President Bill Clinton gestures Monday, Sept. 13, as Yitzhak Rabin (left) shakes hands with Yasser Arafat after signing the historic peace accord.

Shalom!

Religious leaders must help implement accord

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Peace accords under development between Israel, the Palestine Liberation Organization and their Middle East neighbors mean new hopes and responsibilities for Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious leaders.

Those responsibilities will include working to reverse hatreds — long defined as religious differences — and recognizing that the area's Muslims, Christians and Jews have a great deal in common theologically, if not culturally.

Religious themes permeated speeches by U.S., Israeli and Palestinian political leaders at last month's peace-accord ceremony at the White House. President Clinton wove scriptural references into his speech, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin concluded with a Hebrew prayer and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat began by praising God.

Just as participants at the ceremony described the accord in spiritual terms, the religious undercurrent to the bitter political disputes of the Middle East will be a factor in continuing the peace process, according to John L. Esposito, director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington.

Differences between Israel and its Arab neighbors have been a major obstacle in Muslim-Jewish and Muslim-Christian relations, Esposito said.

The vast majority of Israelis are Jewish, while Muslims dominate most of the rest of the region around Israel. But such Christians as Eastern-rite

Staff writer Mike Latona interviews Jehan el-Sedat, widow of the late Egyptian president — see page 18.



Catholics are a majority in Lebanon and have a significant presence in Israel because of the Holy Land.

As religious leaders have attempted to unite their followers, political differences inevitably have defined the direction of ecumenical efforts, even among Christians and Jews.

"Looking at the Mideast, the overriding problem has been political, with a religious significance that is symbolized by the fight over Jerusalem," Esposito explained.

Christians, Jews and Muslims all consider Jerusalem a holy city but it has been under Israeli rule since 1967. Esposito said Christians and Jews have made substantial strides toward better understanding in the last few decades, but their relations with Muslims remain strained.

The peace accord between Israel and the PLO and developing agreements in which other Middle East nations are formally recognizing Israel's right to exist will reduce those religious tensions,

said Warren Eisenberg, director of the international council for B'nai B'rith International.

"This is a peace process that engages people at the religious and spiritual level," said Eisenberg. Tension has arisen even among Western Christians and Jews, he said, from a perception that the Christian community sympathized with Arab claims that Israel was occupying territory that should belong to the Palestinians.

John Borelli, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, said even though the peace accords are essentially a political step, they will create a new basis from which ecumenism and all other relationships can proceed.

The agreement in principle that Israelis and Palestinians can live peacefully side by side means "from now on we're at point B," Borelli said. "We are no longer at point A. We've made it to point B and we won't go back."

Moving on to points C and D both politically and religiously will be a very delicate process, Eisenberg noted.

"We're going to need collaborative support and individual concepts for development," he said. "It's not just going to be Muslims and Jews. Christians have a role."

But as miraculous as the peace accord may be, it will not erase the "hatred and gulf of divisiveness" between Arab and Israeli, he added.

Continued on page 18