

Breaking, not building, walls provides security

BY SUSAN BALZER

Last month, I traveled to Germany to attend an international conference titled "War, Money, and Conscience" that brought together 102 people from 16 countries and four continents. Earlier this year, I traveled to Israel and the occupied (West Bank) territories.

Here are some reflections on my experiences:



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- War is deadly, destructive and expensive.

- War kills and maims innocent civilians and young people in their prime. Not only does war kill the body, it deadens the soul. Young people who grew up being taught to show kindness are trained as soldiers to disregard the humanity of the enemy. Only the person with a weapon is respected.

- The waste of war is tragic and can never be justified. Not only is there the destruction of humanity and the country's infrastructure, there are the lost possibilities of what could have been accomplished with the human and financial resources wasted in war.

If only the money spent to kill enemies would be used to feed, clothe, house, heal and educate people, the possibilities for a safe and secure world would expand exponentially. If only the money used to train people to kill and terrorize were used to train people to resolve conflicts peacefully and to facilitate cross-cultural exchange programs, we could live as neighbors, not enemies. If only a fraction of the money paid

to develop weapons of mass destruction was redirected into ways to conserve our natural resources, we could leave a livable planet to our grandchildren.

- The United States and Israel could learn from Germany.

It took Germany a long time, but that country appears to be learning from its past sins. Germany bears the shame of leading the world into two world wars, of killing millions of Jews and political dissenters, and of building the infamous wall.

German people still carry the burden of the country's history. Many are now determined to work for peace. At the international conference, Germans were signing pledges to do civil disobedience if necessary to prevent warplanes from using German bases to attack Iraq. Germans also are seeking and finding government leaders' support for conscientious objection to military taxation. Some have lost property or suffered imprisonment for resisting the payment of war taxes.

- Security is a strange thing. It can't be increased by racial profiling, bullying or a show of military power. Those tactics didn't work in Germany, aren't working in Israel and won't work in the United States.

Instead, security is about breaking down dividing walls, learning to know human beings who are different from ourselves, and appreciating the variety of cultural expressions in our world. Security is about each person having enough — his own vine and fig tree. As the biblical prophet Amos wrote, "no one shall make them afraid."

Susan Balzer writes for The Hesston Record. She has participated in several peace initiatives.