

# A Christian ambassador for the Holocaust

BY DIANA SWIFT - October 27, 2011



**Dr. Susanna Kokkonen: The lessons to be learned are universal.**

A Finnish-born Pentecostal Christian may seem like an unlikely roving ambassador for an Israeli Holocaust remembrance organization, but for the past three years, Dr. Susanna Kokkonen has been just that.

As director of the Christian Friends of Yad Vashem, Israel's official, memorial to the Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust, Kokkonen brings the message of commemoration and responsibility to Christian audiences in Europe and North America.

"Our basic message is that although the Holocaust is a particularly Jewish tragedy, the lessons to be learned are universal—about how humans behave in such a crisis, how genocide happens and how we can commemorate this," says Kokkonen. She is scheduled to speak in Toronto on Nov. 2, 7:30 to 9:00 p.m., at Grace Church-on-the-Hill.

Kokkonen, who holds a PhD in Holocaust history from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, educates Christians about the changing face of antisemitism—Christian-religious, European-social and Nazi-racial—and stresses the responsibility of the silent bystanders who looked on and did nothing. "It's like bullying in the schoolyard. There's a victim and a perpetrator, but only the onlookers can step in or report the incident. Only they have the power to change things," says Kokkonen. Part of her group's mandate is to put human faces on the victims and their rescuers.

If there was a defining moment in the escalation of German antisemitism toward the Final Solution, she says, it was the infamous Kristallnacht ("Night of the Broken Glass") of Nov. 9, 1938, when gangs of Germans ransacked and burned synagogues, destroyed Jewish homes and businesses and killed Jews in several cities. "This was a watershed moment when antisemitism moved from discrimination and prejudice to the open violence that led to the Holocaust," she says.

Today's young people, though far removed, are eager to learn about the Holocaust. "They are thirsty for knowledge," she says. "And as the remaining survivors get older, it's very important to talk about this. When we hold an event, there is always interest—the audience is always there."

The Friends organization partners with churches and provides film and educational materials for public events. It also runs training seminars for Christian clergy and community leaders. "Many churches make donations to Friends and many hold events on International Holocaust Day, January 27, or on Israel's Holocaust Memorial Day, which in 2012 will be celebrated on April 19.

She invites all visitors to Israel to drop in and learn more. Go to [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org) and click on Christian Friends of Yad Vashem.

Founded in late 2006, Christian Friends is part of the international relations division of Yad Vashem (meaning "a place and a name": Isaiah 56: 4-5). Yad Vashem was established in Jerusalem in 1953 by the Knesset as Israel's Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority. It has grown into a 45-acre complex containing the Holocaust History Museum; memorial sites such as the Children's Memorial and the Hall of Remembrance; the Museum of Holocaust Art; sculptures, outdoor commemorative sites such as the Valley of the Communities, a synagogue, archives, a research institute, a library, a publishing house and an educational centre, the International School for Holocaust Studies. It is the second most-visited tourist site in Israel after the [Western Wall](#).

## Related Posts





**B.C. diocese draws reconciliation lessons from Christian group in N. Ireland**



**Primate announced for Sudan**



**Challenging a culture of silence**

---

---

**Diana Swift**

Diana Swift is an award-winning writer and editor with 30 years' experience in newspaper and magazine editing and production. In January 2011, she joined the *Anglican Journal* as a contributing editor.