

History of the Peace Light

After witnessing the inhumanity of World War I, Lord Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the International Scouting movement, assigned a new mission to Scouting: to strive for and maintain peace in the world. His vision was that, through the world brotherhood of Scouting, humankind would eventually achieve world peace. By providing our youth with opportunities to practice and internalize Scouting's values, we are making that vision come true one Scout at a time.

The Peace Light from Bethlehem is a continuously-burning flame, originating from the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Israel. It is meant to promote peace, harmony and unity among the people of the world regardless of race, ethnicity or religion. For several decades the International Scouting movement - both Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts - have actively promoted global peace and harmony through the distribution of the Peace Light.

Now in its 27th year, the Peace Light from Bethlehem campaign was originally organized by the Austrian Broadcasting Company (ORF) and was part of a large charitable relief mission called "Light into Darkness" for children in need in Austria and abroad. Since 1986 there has been a great deal of cooperation between Scouts from many countries, which has allowed the light to travel all throughout Europe. Each year the light is passed on to over 30 European countries and, for the past decade, to the United States, Canada and Mexico as well.

Each year, a child from Upper Austria is named that year's Peace Light Child and travels to Bethlehem, Israel, to receive the flame from one of the Grotto's oil lamps, which have been burning continuously for over 1,000 years. The light is then flown to Austria where it is distributed at a Service of Dedication to delegations of Scouts from across Europe, who in turn take it back, with a message of peace, to their own countries. The Peace Light is then shared with individuals, families, houses of worship, hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, and cultural centers – with anybody who can appreciate the significance of this "gift."

Due to the dangerous situation in Israel, the 2012 Peace Light Child was not able to fly down to Bethlehem to receive the flame at the Grotto of the Nativity. Instead, a local boy took her place in the ceremony and shared the flame with officials from Austria, who flew the Peace Light back to Austria and shared it with the Peace Light Child. This is a poignant reminder of how much work we still have left to do to achieve peace in this world.

The Peace Light first came to New York in 2001, brought by Canadian Scouts who presented it at Ground Zero. In 2002, DHL delivered the Peace Light as a gift from Belgian Scouts and Guides to the Boy Scouts of America in New York. In 2003 the light didn't make it to the U.S. Fortunately, members of the Catholic Committee on Scouting for the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens had kept the 2002 Peace Light burning and shared that flame again in 2003. In 2004 the Austrian Scout Movement, Austrian Airlines and the Boy Scouts of America International Division arranged to bring the 2004 Peace Light to New York on December 4th. Two security guards and Dr. Thomas Ertlthaler, International Commissioner of Austrian Scouting, flew from Vienna with the Peace Light in two explosion-proof British mining lamps, fueled by smokeless paraffin oil. Austrian Airlines has continued to bring the Peace Light in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012. **It is scheduled to arrive at JFK airport on Wednesday, December 4th, 2013.**

Many churches share the Peace Light during ecumenical services, use the flame to light the candles on their Advent wreaths, pass the flame from person to person during candlelight Christmas Eve services, present the flame to the community at parish tree-lighting events, and deliver the flame to shut-ins and those experiencing loss, illness and hardships. Many churches also maintain the Peace Light year-round, using the flame to ignite baptismal candles and votive lamps. Individuals and families have shared the Peace Light flame with neighbors, relatives and friends both near and far, challenging each recipient to become a channel of peace through his/her words and actions.

In 2011 the flame shared in New Hampshire traveled to West Hartford, Vermont, where it was presented at a community-wide "Service of Hope" in honor of those families still struggling to recover from the devastation caused by Hurricane Irene. In 2012 Scouts from all over New England brought the Peace Light to Newtown, CT, where it was welcomed at local churches and spread throughout the community in the wake of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Also in 2012, Scouts in the NYC area took it upon themselves to present the Peace Light to victims of Hurricane Sandy and to the organizations and rescue workers who responded to the needs of those who suffered significant or total loss of their homes and belongings.

Peace to all of you!