“Come step into the Bible,” reads the brochure in Arabic, Hebrew and English. Just a half kilometer from Jesus’ birthplace, Nazareth Village – a full-scale restored first-century farm and village – welcomes twenty-first century visitors to experience the world he grew up in.

For their vision, intensive research, and leadership of Nazareth Village, Michael and Virginia Hostetler have been named EMU Alumni of the Year for 2003. A photography exhibit in the third floor Hartzler Library Gallery, created by Mike and his Nazarene colleague Grace Abdo, offers a glimpse of the fruits of their labors.

Persons clad in tunics and turbans walk sandal-footed down dusty paths framed by stone walls and olive trees. Young men harvest wheat with scythes and mix mortar with bare feet. Children scamper to and from the wine-press, the sheepfold, and the synagogue. Nazareth Village’s captivating authenticity has drawn thousands from around the world since its conception about ten years ago.

Along with Dr. Nakhle Bishara, a ninth generation Nazarene and devout Greek Orthodox Christian, Mike envisioned a place where people could come and encounter both the historical and the living Jesus. He and Bishara gathered a team of professionals, including architects, writers, and designers (Abdo is one), to bring the vision to life.

Mike, as executive director, takes charge of fundraising, marketing, designing, supervising, and dreaming up new ideas to implement. Ginny volunteers her time as a tour guide and trainer, writer, editor, and researcher.

But Nazareth Village, as the photographs imply, is more than just a tourist attraction. The staff, along with volunteers of all ages, become Jesus’ neighbors and companions. As Ginny and the other guides lead groups through the vineyards, terraced fields, and stone houses, they tell stories and answer questions about who Jesus was and what he taught.

Such opportunity is rare because Muslims, who comprise 70 percent of the population of Nazareth city, are strictly forbidden to abandon their faith. Although many Jews and Christians also populate the area, proselytizing (pushing religious conversion) is illegal. Nevertheless, “it is not against the law to share your faith and answer questions,” Ginny points out.

Moreover, the story of Jesus has worldwide appeal. Mike reasons that “it’s very appropriate and very natural” to make information about Jesus readily available in hands-on form, especially in his own hometown. Tours are conducted in many languages for local school groups and visitors from myriad countries, which have included China, Indonesia, Central America, France, and Nigeria.

All the staff are native Christian Arabs, with the exception of one Muslim and one Messianic believer. The Hostetlers attend a local Arab Baptist church; Mennonites decided long ago that due to the area’s religious plurality, Mennonite workers would support already-established Christian groups rather than introduce yet another sect.

Mike and Ginny have lived in Israel since 1996 with their children Stefan (15) and Sofia (13), developing Nazareth Village bit by bit. Economic and political anxiety makes the project’s maintenance a struggle at times, due to the Intifada and very low tourism. But the Village continues to grow in its quiet and unthreatening way, bringing timeless reminders of hope to a broken modern-day Holy Land.

When asked when the Village will be complete, Mike replies, “I hope never. The process of discovering and understanding who Jesus was should never end.” The Hostetlers’ contract with Mennonite Mission Network will conclude in 2005.

Whether they choose to stay or move on at that point, Mike and Ginny trust that Nazareth Village will continue to play an important role in modern-day Israel. A sign at the entrance to the photo exhibit reads, “In a land where mistrust, anger and violence are commonplace, Nazareth Village seeks to be a place of encounter between people—a place of learning and sharing, for growth in understanding and trust.”

The library exhibit will remain open through Oct. 31. More photographs and information can be found in the Fall 2003 edition of Crossroads and at www.nazarethvillage.com.