

Christian presence in Holy Land small and getting smaller

September 15, 2006

Posted: 9/15/06

Christian presence in Holy Land small and getting smaller

By Steve Chambers

Religion News Service

BETHLEHEM, West Bank—Nakla Qaber, whose [Greek Orthodox](#) roots stretch back generations in a [West Bank](#) Christian enclave, runs a successful restaurant at a time when most Palestinians are struggling.

But when it came time for his son and three daughters to make their own way in the world, they went off to college in the United States and Canada and never came back.

Muslims
Abu Iyad
(left) and
Abuzayed
Odeh watch
the news
on Al-
Jazeera at
their
Christian
friends'
auto body
store in
Bethlehem.
"We share
all our life,
the good
times and
bad times,"
Iyad said.
(RNS photo
by Andrew
Mills/*The
Star-Ledger*
of Newark,
N.J.)

"Every time I go to services, I look around and see the number of worshippers declining, Sunday after Sunday," said Qaber, 63, who lives in Beit Jala, alongside the major Christian city of Bethlehem. "No one wants to leave his country, so this is a miserable thing, but if my sons and daughters stay overseas, someday I will follow them."

The exodus of Christians from the Holy Land troubles the faithful worldwide. With tensions rising the past five years and economic conditions worsening, some have begun to whisper about a day when the native Christian population disappears entirely.

Now, with armed conflict—or at best an uneasy peace—between Muslims and Jews, Christians once again find themselves caught in the crossfire. The vast majority are Palestinian Arabs living in the West Bank and suffering the same frustrations and dangers as their Muslim neighbors.

Many of them blame the United States for failing to bring peace and stability to the region—thereby allowing a rise in religious fundamentalism that has increased tensions for the descendants of the first Christians.

“Radical Islam does not even like moderate Muslims, so how can it be good for Christians?” said [Jack Khazmo](#), a [Syrian Orthodox](#) Christian who edits a pro-Palestinian political magazine called *al Bayader Assiyasi*. “We Christians belong to this land and to our country, but the rise of radicalism will affect our presence.”

Experts say the Christian population in Israel and the Palestinian territories has fallen steeply in recent years and may number only about 50,000. Since 1948, when Christians were estimated at 20 percent of all Palestinians in the region, their numbers have dropped to roughly 2 percent, according to the [Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation](#), a group based in Bethesda, Md.

9/11 Five Years Later

- [For American Muslims, everything changed on 9/11](#)
- [Differentiate 'Muslim' from 'terrorist' scholars say](#)
- [No sweeping revival, but impact of 9/11 still felt in churches](#)
- [Negative perceptions of Muslims persist, panel says](#)
- [Who's Who in Islam: major groups](#)
- Christian presence in Holy Land small and getting smaller
- [Islam built on five pillars of worship & five pillars of faith](#)
 - [Poll shows some prejudice against Muslims](#)
 - [Children of Abraham: Muslims view God, church & state through different lenses](#)

“There is a concern about losing the Christian presence in the Holy Land,” said [Antonios Kireopoulos](#), associate general secretary for International Affairs and Peace for the New York-based National Council of Churches. “We do not want only to be the caretakers of monuments. But we realize

that the tensions and ongoing violence are real.”

Local Christian leaders argue it would be disastrous if the native Christian population disappeared—not just for a people so rooted in the land they are often referred to as “the living stones,” but also for regional stability. Wealthier, better educated and more closely tied to the West than most Palestinian Arabs, these Christians have long been a moderating force in the West Bank.

Still, members of the [15 denominations of Palestinian Christians](#) often complain they feel invisible, even if they are part of much larger churches in the United States and Europe. Conservative Christians in America tend to support Israel, and many pilgrims visit holy sites in Jerusalem without realizing a native Christian population remains.

Even as they struggle, many Christians in the West Bank strive for influence within the [Palestinian Authority](#). A Christian holds one Cabinet post in the Hamas-led government, seven are members of Parliament and others lead cities like Bethlehem and neighboring Beit Jala, which together comprise a historic Christian enclave.

George Sa’adeh, deputy mayor of Bethlehem, said despite occasional tensions between Christians and Muslims, the groups generally are united in calling for more freedom of movement for Palestinians and a reduction in tensions with the Israelis.

“All the people want peace, even [Hamas](#),” he said. “The people are frustrated. We must stop the killing, and I believe the United States has the power to make peace if it wants to make peace.”

Peace and war are not abstract concepts for Sa’adeh, a Greek Orthodox Christian. One day in March 2003, when he was out shopping with his wife and two daughters, Israeli soldiers mistook his car for one carrying two fugitive terrorists.

They riddled it with machine-gun fire, wounding him and his 15-year-old daughter and killing his 12-year-old daughter, Christine.

Sitting in his office overlooking the Basilica of the Nativity, built 17 centuries ago on the site where tradition says Christ was born, Sa'adeh took out a wallet photograph of a smiling Christine and recalled how an Israeli group of bereaved families reached out to comfort him.

"Talking about peace and ending the war takes a lot of faith and courage," he said. "As Jesus taught us, we must forgive. But when I call for peace, I also call for justice and an end to the (Israeli) occupation."

Sa'adeh and other Christians need a special pass from the Israeli government to leave the West Bank and visit their churches in Jerusalem.

Nisreen Kunkar, who handles public relations for Beit Jala, has been unable to visit the home of her in-laws in Jerusalem, although she has been married for years.

Such obstructions, a number of Christians said, inflame tensions in the West Bank and help persuade many of their religious brethren to emigrate.

Raji Zeidan, mayor of Beit Jala and a Christian, said one of the most confounding and frustrating things that has happened to his one-square-mile city in decades was the recent construction of a barrier separating Israel from Palestinian-controlled territory in the West Bank.

The 20-foot concrete wall, which the Israeli government began building in 2002 to keep out suicide bombers, snakes through the town, isolating stores, separating children from playgrounds and, most important in Zeidan's eyes, denying Christians access to their own land.

"Beit Jala is a small town, mostly Christian, and we own most of the undeveloped land," he said. "That is our only chance to flourish and

develop, but now it is under confiscation because of the wall. If you lose all opportunities, what will happen? You will go.”

Steve Chambers writes for The Star-Ledger of Newark, N.J.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.