

Varied testimonies touch on themes of faith, forgiveness, unity & inclusion

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NORMAN, Okla.—The widow of a Christian who was martyred by Muslims in the Gaza Strip prays for revenge, her friend Hanna Massad told participants at the New Baptist Covenant regional meeting in Oklahoma. And her idea of revenge is seeing the perpetrators turn from Islam to faith in Christ.

Rami Ayyad, manager of Gaza's only Christian bookstore, was abducted and executed Oct. 7, 2007, as he closed his shop, explained Massad, pastor of Gaza Evangelical Church.

Gaza is a narrow slice of land, 30 miles long by seven miles wide, between Israel and the Mediterranean Sea, and it is home to 1.5 million people, Massad said.

"We live between two fires—Israeli occupation and Muslim militancy," he reported. Unemployment soars between 50 percent and 70 percent, and Massad's church helps provide food to thousands of families, both Muslims and Christians.

Former President Jimmy Carter issued a renewed call for unity at the regional gathering of the New Baptist Covenant in Norman, Okla.

Ayyad was martyred because he would not renounce his faith, Massad said. When he was killed, he and his wife, Pauline, had two children, and she was

pregnant.

“This is our faith: There is nothing Jesus cannot overcome, because he is the one who stands and says, ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’” Massad stressed.

Sympathetic Christians from other parts of the world often ask why the Gaza Christians must endure persecution and why their faith is tested, he said. The answer is simple: Because of persecution, “we are able to learn in ways we could not otherwise.”

One lesson Christians in Gaza are learning is how to practice forgiveness toward persecutors, he added. “You either allow bitterness to control you, or you pray to ask God to allow you to forgive.”

That’s difficult, Massad conceded, especially when Ayyad’s little children come to church without their father, and when Ayyad’s young son, George, asks, “Mama, where’s Daddy?”

But because of forgiveness she has found through Christ, Pauline Ayyad wishes an unconventional outcome for her husband’s executioners.

“This is my revenge,” she told Massad, “that those who murdered my husband would come to know the Lord.”

“Sooner or later, all of us will leave this world. What legacy will you leave?” Massad asked the crowd. “Your brothers and sisters in the Middle East are stretching our arms to you, saying, ‘Come and help us.’”



Sarah Stewart, ministry resident at First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, described the challenges she has faced as a woman answering God's call to ministry within Baptist life.

Later at the New Baptist Covenant regional meeting, former President Jimmy Carter announced he plans to travel to Gaza soon "to let the world know what is happening to the people there."

Carter, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, reported he has visited more than 125 countries since leaving the White House. And he expressed concern about the reputation of Christians worldwide.

"The pre-eminent impression is of Christians struggling with each other for positions of authority and who seem incapable of cooperating with each other," he said. "Division is a cancer metastasizing in the body of Christ."

Carter, one of the organizers of the initial New Baptist Covenant national meeting in Atlanta, Ga., last year and the subsequent regional gatherings this year, introduced himself as a seventh-generation Georgia Baptist and “the husband of the most active and most famous deacon” at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga., his wife, Rosalynn.

But controversies about the role of women in the church—as well as different opinions about hot-button issues such as creationism, abortion, capital punishment and the separation of church and state—are secondary to the central gospel message that unites Baptist Christians, he emphasized.

“We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ,” he said, asking the crowd to repeat that simple gospel message.

Gov. Brad Henry, a longtime member of First Baptist Church in Shawnee, Okla., told the New Baptist Covenant participants he typically has shied away from sharing his Christian testimony publicly.

“My faith is intensely personal to me. I have too often seen public officials and politicians parade around, wearing their religion on their sleeves and using it as an excuse to judge others,” he said.

But in speaking to his fellow Baptists, Henry told how he accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior at age 16 during a revival at Falls Creek Assembly in southern Oklahoma and was subsequently baptized at First Baptist Church in Shawnee.

In the years that followed, Henry served as a deacon, the teacher of a high school Sunday school class and as a missions volunteer on a trip to Ghana, distributing mosquito nets to combat malaria.

“My faith has sustained me,” he said, describing how one of his four daughters was born with a rare neuromuscular disease that led to her

death at age 7 months.

During the final session of the two-day gathering, Sarah Stewart described the challenges she has faced as a woman answering God's call to ministry within Baptist life. That calling came as the result of "a thousand small yeses" since accepting Christ as her Lord and Savior at age 8, she said.

"The drumbeat I hear is my Savior calling, "There is work to be done,"" said Stewart, ministry resident at First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City.

Experience ministering to youth, teaching and preaching within the context of a supportive congregation confirmed and clarified God's calling on her life, she said.

"My calling came in the midst of community," she said. "God used the church to affirm his calling on my life. I realized God created me to shepherd his people."