

Christian presence quickly dwindling in Gaza

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GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (BP)—At Easter, Gaza Baptist Church leader Shady Al-Najjar described those sheltered in the church's remnants as "[too tired to suffer](#)," living "very difficult" and "useless" days.

Since then, Al-Najjar has fled to Egypt, and the Israel Defense Forces set up shop in what remains of the church compound damaged in the war, former church pastor Hanna Massad told Baptist Press May 8.

Al-Najjar is among many Christians who are fleeing Gaza with a renewed vigilance, [International Christian Concern](#) said as the Israel-Hamas War enters its eighth month, speculating whether any Christians would remain.

"They are faced with the dilemma of staying and helping others rebuild or leaving to join relatives abroad and start a new life elsewhere," ICC said in a May 6 press release. "For now, many are deciding to leave."

The organization estimated 25 percent to half of the 900 to 1,000 Christians who lived in Gaza before the war have fled, and an additional 25 percent are applying to leave.

Israel's occupation of the Rafah border crossing threatens safe passage to Egypt. Thousands of displaced Palestinians are fleeing Rafah for Deir el-Balah about 12 miles north, [Al-Jazeera reported](#), and were straining a scant supply of fresh water.

Few Baptists left in Gaza even before the war



Gaza Baptist Church, established by Southern Baptist missionaries in 1954, was rebuilt in 2006 to include a six-floor compound across the street from a Gaza police station in Gaza City. (File Photo)

Only a handful of Baptists lived in Gaza City before the war, Massad said, as most Christians there fled when Hamas violently seized control of Gaza and the West Bank in 2006-2007.

While 50 typically would attend services at the church when he visited before the war, Massad said, many of them were not church members. Most Christians there are either Orthodox or Catholic.

Massad estimates 200 Christians already have fled, and perhaps just as many are rushing to get permits to leave.

“It’s really hard to know,” Massad said, as those who leave usually give short notice to others in the community. “Many people in the Christian

community expressed they want to stay in Gaza,” he said, referencing an update from a Catholic church leader in Jerusalem.

With their homes and livelihoods stolen by the war, Christians had found refuge in the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius and in The Holy Family Church, a Catholic congregation. Gaza Baptist Church, located across the street from a police station that IDF likely would target, had remained a last resort.

But deteriorating conditions in Gaza, including famine in the north and increasing food insecurity elsewhere, are making it more difficult to remain in the area.

More than 34,000 have died in Gaza in the war and more than 78,000 have been wounded, the Hamas-run health ministry said May 7.

The death toll in Israel, first set at nearly 1,400 from Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack that launched the war, was officially set at around 1,200 in February, based on Israel’s tabulation. More than 8,700 were wounded. Of the 132 hostages Hamas continues to hold, 38 are believed dead, the international i24 News reported May 8.

Massad, founder and president of Christian Mission to Gaza, sends monetary support to Christians sheltered there—coordinating the distribution of goods through shop owners—and provides hot meals when able.

He’s hopeful a Christian presence will remain in Gaza. There are no other Baptist churches there, but several Catholic and Orthodox congregations are on the West Bank and in Bethlehem City.

“It’s hard to know,” he said. “I suspect at least a few hundred will be there.”