

Jerusalem Baptist pastor returns to Israel

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JERUSALEM (BP)—Al Nucciarone has observed numerous attacks on Israel during his 15 years as pastor at Jerusalem Baptist Church. He has experienced the missile strikes and gazed on the aftermath of bus bombings. He has lost friends in the violence.

Nucciarone wasn't in Israel on Oct. 7, the day Hamas attacked Israeli settlements and killed approximately 1,400 people while taking more than 200 hostages. He was in North Carolina on a trip taken every two years to the United States to visit congregations that support his church. But, he said, that day started with the Lord speaking to him.

"I was reading in Acts 20 about Paul's determination to go to Jerusalem in spite of the promise of bondage and chains," he told BP. "He regarded his life as nothing compared to finishing his course and preaching the gospel. After I read that, I got news about the attack."

He was shocked, particularly with the intensity of the violence inflicted on unarmed people and families.

"There was supposed to be an attack from Hezbollah from the north at the same time," said Nucciarone, who is also the Fellowship of Christian Athletes' Middle East representative. "Hamas jumped ahead because of the music festival."

Militants began their attack just after dawn, as participants of a music festival were just winding down following a night of dancing. Many Israelis in that area reside in a kibbutz, where people voluntarily live and work together. These communities became the next target.

Jerusalem is a city holy to Christians, Jews and Muslims, and so it lends itself to conflict as well as tourists, something that brings a focus to Jerusalem Baptist Church's ministry, he noted.

"We are in Jerusalem not to enjoy the sites but to preach the gospel," Nucciarone said.

Responding to people who are hurting

Staying in touch while working his way home, Nucciarone learned church members continued to meet for worship amid the upsetting news.

Travels took him through Vienna on the way back for a speaking engagement. While there, he learned his daughter's employer had suggested she, her husband and their three boys leave Jerusalem for a few weeks. The decision was made for his wife, Billie, to return to Chicago and be with them for the next month or so.

"Hopefully, things will settle," said Nucciarone, who arrived back in Israel on Oct. 25. "My son-in-law, who teaches at an Anglican school and helps in our church, will stay here with me."

On the day of Nucciarone's return, Send Relief announced gifts from Southern Baptists had provided bomb shelters, food, medical supplies and more to Israel and the surrounding region. Baptist Village, a Christian camp and conference center outside of Tel Aviv, has become a place of refuge in partnership with Send Relief to those displaced.

Jason Cox, vice president of International Ministry for Send Relief, announced partnerships with local Christian groups also made trauma counseling available.

"Driven by the love of Jesus, Christians are ready and responding to bring help and hope to hurting people," he said.

Nucciarone urged others against thinking distance prevents one from being active in helping.

“Pray for our safety. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,” he said. “Pray for the Baptist Convention of Israel as they help Israelis who have lost their home. Pray for open hearts for the gospel. Pray for the growth and unity of our church.”