

# **Christianity, Israel and the West Bank**

## **Condition of Christians in West Bank Worsening**

### **April, 2005 Update - William J. Murray**

The situation of Christians in the Holy Land is worsening by the day. During Christmas of 2004 Muslims filled Bethlehem Square, setting up loud speakers for day long prayers so that Christians could not even get to the Church of the Nativity to pray. The Palestinian Authority Police now stand at the entrance to the church door and question each person who enters asking their citizenship and how they arrived. I have been to churches on six of the world's seven continents and even in the old Soviet Union when it was communist and I was never before questioned by a policeman at the door. This is intimidation plain and simple.

Christians in the Bethlehem - Beit Jala area are being offered up to double the value of their homes by Muslim buyers. Saudi Arabia and other Islamic nations furnish the money because they want to make sure every Christian leaves. Christian families dating back to the time of Christ are being forced to move because they simply have no work. Beit Jala, which was 100% Christian in 1995 was ordered by the Palestinian Authority to add three Muslim city council members. Bethlehem, which was 80% Christian at the time of the 1948 war that divided the land, is now only 20% Christian. As the Christian population declines the repression becomes greater.

### **Christian Schools Forced to Accept Muslims**

Some of the Christian schools in the West Bank did previously accept a few Muslims as a means of exposing them to Christ, but now every Christian school is forced to admit Muslims by the Palestinian Authority and to hire a Muslim "educator" to teach Muslim students the Koran. Christian schools cannot choose text books, but must use the same Palestinian Authority published materials that are used in the public schools. These text books require memorization of Koran passages and have a much distorted view of history.

Christian Schools in the Bethlehem area are filling up with Muslims because Christian families no longer have the means to send their children. Rather than send their children to the Palestinian Authority schools where they will be taught Islam and hatred, they sell their homes and move to Canada, the United States or South America. In some of the Christian schools up to 30% of the students are Muslims.

During a meeting with two headmasters of Christian schools – one from a charity based school and one from a more expensive school – I agreed to personally pay the tuition and expenses of one student each year. The cost, depending on the school, is \$300 to \$600 per year. This is a small portion of the actual cost, but it is the portion families must pay each year and because of the high unemployment can no longer pay. David Ortiz, an evangelist who has lived in Israel for 20 years, was present at the meeting. He and I agreed to set up some system to provide scholarships for Christian children to bring Christian enrollment back up in the schools.

In most Christian schools the majority of the tuition is paid for through scholarships. At Hope School for example the cost per student is about \$3,000 a year and parents are charged about \$300 a year. Not even that amount is affordable to families with virtually no income. It is that portion we are agreeing to pay for when parents do not have the means. This will increase Christian enrollment at these schools.

### **Christian Population Continues to Decline**

In just the last five years the Christian population in the "West Bank" has dropped from 35,000 to 30,000. That 30,000 level is probably a "least sustainable" level. Once the population drops under 30,000 it will no longer be an economically self sustaining community and the decline will increase even more rapidly. Giving the families an opportunity to keep their children in Christian schools will help to maintain the stability of the population.

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## **Media Distortions**

Western media, particularly in the European Union, are slanted against the Jews and Christians in the Holy Land. Media in the United States are not much better. Not even Fox cable news reports on the plight of the Christians of the Holy Land. Interviews are given only to some Christian leaders in Bethlehem who have sold out to Islam in hopes of receiving favors from the Palestinian Authority. These "leaders" are now learning the same lesson as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain who signed a treaty with Adolph Hitler just before he invaded Poland and World War II began. Playing with the school bully never pays off in the end; you just keep paying the devil his dues.

### **Jewish "Settlements" and Christianity**

My wife Nancy and I lived in the evangelist apartment in Ariel operated by the ministry of David Ortiz and his wife Leah. Through their witness to Christ there are now over a dozen Christian families in this Jewish "settlement" of Ariel. On American TV, every time the word "settlement" is used, trailer homes are shown. Ariel has 18,000 residents, not counting the more than 8,000 students attending the University of Judea and Samaria. Ariel has three American style supermarkets and several shopping centers, as it is a center of commerce for other "settlements." There are at least four 24-hour convenience stores that I know of. With the exception of the tallest multi story apartment buildings, most of the homes are made of stone, which is common in this area. At the edge of town, the industrial zone already has 160 factories producing \$500,000,000 a year in economic output. Does this sound like the "settlements" you see on mainstream media news shows?

At a prayer meeting in the evangelist apartment in Ariel that was attended by Jews, Gentiles and Arab we held hands together; we prayed together; and we sang together because we were one in Jesus Christ. No unarmed, law abiding Arab is barred from Ariel. Arabs are welcome and do attend the University of Judea and Samaria in Ariel, sleeping in the same dorms as the Jewish students. The Israeli society is open and for the most part tolerant. On the other hand, Jews endanger their lives if they go into Palestinian Authority controlled areas. The fact that my wife and I were questioned entering the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is a classic example of the difference between a closed society and an open one such as Israel. In the more than twenty years I have been visiting Israel I have never had an Israeli policeman question my purpose for being anywhere in this nation, not even when I ventured to within inches of the fence that separates Israel from Lebanon. (Although I am sure they thought I was nuts.)

### **An Open Versus a Closed Society**

There is freedom in Israel because there is religious freedom. Where there is no religious freedom there is no freedom. If people cannot meet to worship God they have no freedom of assembly, no freedom of speech and no freedom of press. In the Palestinian Authority areas there is no true freedom of religion and there is no real freedom. Our brothers and sisters in Christ who live in the land need our help.

Distributed by:

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