With no peace
in sight, Christians
are fleeing the
Holy Land.

DON WAGNER

A Modern-Day

While visiting Israel and the Palestinian areas last June, I invited three of my former students from North Park University out to dinner. All three are Palestinian Christians who returned home after graduation to be close to their families and to take jobs that could in some small way help their people.

Two live in Jerusalem, so they had no difficulty in reaching the restaurant. The third had to travel for more than two and a half hours to join us. In the past, the trip would have taken thirty minutes, but now it is a major undertaking because of the "wall of separation" and the five military checkpoints between her home and the restaurant.

When I learned that she also did not have a Jerusalem identity card, I urged my former student not to come. Without that card, she could have been arrested for entering the city. But she insisted on meeting us.

It was a reminder to me that while I am able to travel in and out of Jerusalem as an American, she cannot, simply because she is a Palestinian.

Things have become very difficult for Middle Eastern Christians these days. So difficult, many Christians are fleeing the region.

While the situation is most severe in Iraq, the Holy Land itself has seen a rapid decline in the Christian population. Churches in Israeli-occupied

areas are nearly empty, as many parishioners have left or are unable to get to church because of the difficulty Palestinian Christians have in getting through checkpoints. Among those who remain, very few are under eighteen. Ten years ago, half of Palestinian Christians were under eighteen. Now most young people are gone.

During our dinner, I asked the students about their jobs, families, and futures. I was particularly concerned about how a severe economic boycott that has crippled the local Palestinian economy was affecting them.

Two students work for international organizations and so were receiving regular paychecks. The third had not been paid in the six months since Hamas had won the national elections.

The students had plenty to say about the economic boycott. As one put it: "Here we held honest democratic elections that were monitored by the European Union and the Jimmy Carter Center in Atlanta, but because Israel and the United States did not approve, we are all being punished because they don't like who we elected. Is this a double standard or what?"

Then I asked them about their futures: "What are your plans? Are you planning to stay here and continue to work?"

I was not surprised when each said in their own way: "Outside of our

families, there is nothing here for us. All of our friends are leaving or have already left."
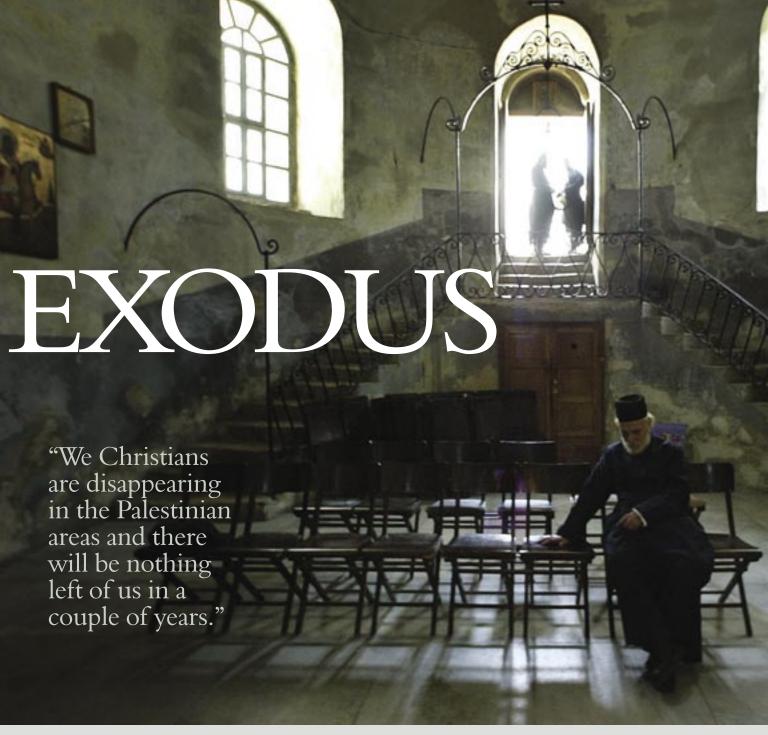
"I can't get out fast enough," one said. Not long afterward, he left for graduate studies in the United States. The other two will soon follow him, joining the "brain drain" and exodus of Palestinian Christians.

Like those who have gone before them, they will find employment, get married, start a family, and settle down far from their homeland. They will probably never move back.

I was recently discussing my visit to Jerusalem with a Palestinian Christian student who is studying for her MBA at North Park. She commented on the absence of young people now in her village, which is still around 90 percent Christian.

"Up until September 2000," she said, "you could walk through my village and you would see that most of the people on the street and in the cafés were people my age, in their early twenties and perhaps down to fourteen or fifteen years of age. Today they are nearly absent."

She added, "When the fighting intensified between the Israeli military and Palestinian militias, life also became worse for all of us.…We Christians are disappearing in the Palestinian areas and there will be nothing left of us in a couple of years. I have always been

EXODUS

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committed to going back, but now I'm wondering about it myself."

Historically, Christians made up about 20 percent of the total Palestinian population. But after 1948 the numbers began to decline. Yet even after Israel conquered the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip in 1967, Christians still made up 13 percent of the population.

In 1990, Bernard Sabella, a sociologist and professor at Bethlehem University, surveyed the Christian population in Jerusalem and the West Bank, and found that only 4 percent of the population was Christian. His survey

revealed that Christians were leaving for three primary reasons: lack of jobs and the economic blight in the Palestinian areas; the severity of the Israeli occupation; and the grim future facing families and, especially, children.

In the year 2000, another survey was conducted and that number had dropped to about 2 percent. Today, Christian leaders believe the percentage continues to decline with no hope in sight for a reversal.

"If this downward trend continues, there will be nothing left of the Christian communities in these regions within a generation," Bishop

Elias Chacour of the Melkite Catholic Church in Galilee told an audience in Chicago recently. "All you will have are the empty churches or 'dead stones' as I prefer to call them, for biblical archeologists to visit and Christian tourists to visit. The 'living stones' of the body of Christ will have vanished."

He also expressed exasperation that Christians in the United States seem unconcerned about Christians in the Holy Land.

"The church is dying in the Holy

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Land because there is no peace and we look to you in the United States, the most powerful nation in the world and the one with the strongest churches to help us, but there is no help on the horizon," Bishop Chacour said. "Why? We do not understand why you Christians who have so much seem to care so little about us."

Even in Lebanon, which until recently had a Christian majority, is witnessing an exodus of Christians. The July-August 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah brought massive destruction to Lebanon.

During the war, several Covenant pastors received regular updates from Pastor Joseph Najem of the Free Evangelical Church of Beirut. After the war ended, Pastor Najem paused to reflect on why this war was fought at all.

"The U.S. and Israel have made a big fuss about calling everyone that opposes them a terrorist," he said. "This is not true. We as Christians should make sure to side with the truth, with the oppressed, even if the truth accuses us at times. The whole Middle East crisis is dealing with injustice, whether in Palestine or in Lebanon. The root problem is a heart problem. I understand human depravity now. It is here before me every day."

In Iraq the situation for Christians is the most severe of any Middle Eastern country. According to a recent story in the Catholic journal *America,* about 600,000 people, or more than half of that country's 1.2 million Christians, have fled Iraq since the war began.

And who could blame them? Iraq has slipped into a brutal civil war and for Christians who are caught in the middle, there is virtually no security.

Last July, I received a phone call from an Iraqi pastor who had arrived in Chicago and needed help. He had fled Baghdad when a death sentence was put out on his life by an extremist group.

Friends from his congregation were able to secretly take him to Syria where he subsequently filed for asylum in the United States. Now, seven months later, he was hoping to be reunited with his wife and two young daughters who he has not seen since last February.

They will have to start over. He was working a night shift at a local Home Depot store at minimum wages while he learned English and saved money for his family to join him. Local churches are now providing assistance.

Christians who remain in Iraq are threatened by the violence that has engulfed that country. On October 4, a bomb ripped through an Assyrian Christian neighborhood in Baghdad, killing nine. Then, five days later, Father Boulos Iskandar, a priest in the Syrian Orthodox Church in Mosul, one of the largest cities in northern Iraq, was kidnapped and later beheaded. Recently more than a dozen Christian girls have been kidnapped and raped.

Thankfully, the Covenant Church in Sweden and the Church of Sweden (Lutheran) have received several thousand Iraqi Christian asylum cases in recent years and have issued appeals concerning these atrocities. Is it not time that the churches in the United States do the same for these threatened sisters and brothers in Christ?

What else can we do?

We can pray for and study the situations facing Christians in the Middle East. Our women's associations, men's groups, mission committees, and youth groups can contact local Middle Eastern Christians and request speakers and find ways to assist these sisters and brothers in Christ in the Middle East. Another step would be for U.S. churches to set up sister relationships with churches in Palestine, Iraq, or Lebanon, and maintain contact and publicize prayer requests.

Another important step is to work with Middle Eastern Christians to publicize these atrocities and then contact our senators and members of Congress. Commissions of inquiry need to be sent to investigate these cases, perhaps in partnership with international human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The silence of western churches must be overcome. Most of these situations—such as the Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian cases—cry out for a political solution.

The Middle East is one of the most complicated, difficult, and controversial issues for Christians to take on. So much so, that many of us want to throw up our hands and give up.

My ninety-year-old mother has been telling me for nearly thirty years to forget about working for justice and peace in the Middle East, because, as she says, people have been fighting there "since Cain and Abel."

"There won't be peace over there until Jesus comes back," she says.

While I love my mother, I find her statement incompatible with the life and witness of Jesus.

Consider the event that took place on the Mount of Olives just prior to Jesus's ascension. One of the disciples asked Jesus if this would be the moment he would restore the kingdom to Israel. Jesus was actually quite harsh with the disciple. Luke records him as responding: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority."

In other words, don't look for signs that point to the end or put your faith on these latter-day events. We don't have the luxury of resignation.

Instead, be faithful to Jesus's commandment: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

It seems to me that Jesus was directing his followers to go into the difficult places, starting with Jerusalem, the city where he was crucified. As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12:26, if one member of the body of Christ suffers, "all suffer together with it."

May God call us to listen to our sisters and brothers and respond to their pain, and help guard their dignity, and in some small way to bring healing and peace to their plight. ❏