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Why Are Christians Really Leaving Bethlehem?

JERUSALEM, Israel -- Arab Christians in Bethlehem have been suffering from human rights abuses and economic hardships for years. But some are trying to bring a message of hope into their lives.

It could be described as a modern day exodus: Christians are leaving Palestinian Arab-controlled areas like Bethlehem in great numbers.

"It's my prediction that if the remaining Christians in the West Bank and Gaza -- Gaza only has maybe a thousand, two thousand Christians," human rights lawyer Justus Weiner told CBN News. "If their needs are not addressed in 10 or 15 or at most 20 years, there won't be any Christians in the cradle of Christianity. This will be a kind of memorial, a museum."

Weiner said the threat of persecution, including beatings and forced marriages between Christian women and Muslim men, are some of the reasons Christians have left.

Although tourism and the economy picked up last year, uncertainty still prevails.

Pastor Steve Khoury talked more about why Christians are leaving Palestinian areas in droves and what his ministry is doing to help, on 'The 700 Club' May 8. Click play to watch.

"I know if you just look deep within their hearts, I know many people have fear and doubt in the unknown and unseen," Pastor Steve Khoury told CBN News.

Pastor Khoury leads churches in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem. Part of the congregations' outreach includes Christmas banquets each year, sponsored in part by CBN.

Khoury said they do many unorthodox things to bring the message that hope is only built on the solid rock of Jesus.

Khoury grew up on the mission field. His father, Dr. Naim Khoury, started Holy Land Missions 30 years ago.

He said his experiences growing up as the son of a missionary taught him not only the life of a missionary, but also the struggles and battles of every believer.

"God has burdened my heart in a great way," Khoury wrote on [his web site](#). "He has shown me that Arabs can come to salvation; He has shown me that Jews can come to the Messiah, and that the people in Israel are losing hope in life."

"Seeing people bleed every day, and seeing a person one day and gone the next because of violence has made me appreciate life," he said.

There are only about 15,000 born-again Christians in Israel. They face daily persecution by the other two dominating religions.

Pastor Khoury has seen church members attacked and discriminated against because of their faith. Several believers under his ministry have been martyred, including his own uncle. The church in Bethlehem has been firebombed 14 times, and Dr. Naim Khoury has been shot at several times in the last 10 years.

Nevertheless, [Holy Land Missions](#) has reached out to thousands over the years through their many outreach programs, including Calvary Church in Jerusalem and First Baptist in Bethlehem.