



Charles Lyons, Pastor
Armitage Baptist Church
Chicago, Illinois

Jesus lives in Bethlehem

Pow! Pow-Pow! Pow! Four more shots in the long battle between good and evil. The first bullet caught the shoulder of the dark form emerging from the car that night. The bullet spun him around and knocked him to the pavement. Perhaps because he was down, the other three shots missed him, hitting a low wall nearby.

Naim Khoury, pastor of First Baptist Church of Bethlehem, survived that attack four years ago, as well as the 14 times his church has been bombed. Saved 41 years ago at a youth meeting in Jerusalem, he graduated from Baptist Bible College, Springfield, Missouri, in 1976. Returning to his hometown, Bethlehem, in 1980, he started First Baptist in a two-bedroom apartment. His wife, Alvira, and four children have lived and served in the birthplace of Jesus for a generation. Paul, 25, and Peter, 24, are attending BBC in Springfield. Lydia, 28, is studying in Spain. Steven, 27, a graduate of BBC, planted Calvary Baptist in north Jerusalem in 2004.

The Bethlehem metropolitan area, populated by 150,000 Arabs, 90 percent Muslim, is part of the West Bank, under the Palestinian Authority. When Khoury began First Baptist, there was no other Baptist church in Bethlehem. Failing historical records proving there was a church in Bethlehem in the first century (I think most of us would like to believe there was), it is safe to say that for the better part of 2000 years no Baptist church existed there. So the first Baptist church in 2000 years in a continuously inhabited city is pretty remarkable.

One of Khoury's early converts was a young man whose handicap made crutches a necessity. Placing his faith in the Jesus of his hometown, he was cut off from his family, disowned, and disinherited. Khoury would carry this young son in the faith on his back up and down hills making house visits. Today, this brother, married with three children, survives on meager social welfare subsistence and help the family receives from the church every month.

The congregation carries the weight of a 90 percent unemployment rate. The church is a wonderful example of New Testament Christianity. Not only is the population surrounding it largely lost, it is militantly opposed to Christianity. They shoot preachers there. They bomb churches there. Yet, in this hostile atmosphere, First Baptist thrives and multiplies. It has built one of the largest youth centers in the West Bank. Its physical separation from the church building makes it a stronger tool to reach youth who otherwise would not come or be allowed to attend. However, despite the social, political, and religious realities, there are 50 kids in the church youth group. There is the ministry in the old city of Jerusalem carrying a full schedule of services and Bible study. There is the Jericho mission. Also a Bible institute serves seven students currently. The Bethlehem congregation is served by four full-time pastors.

It is probably safe to say that 99 percent of evangelical money that flows into the region goes to Jewish missions. In addition to the local economy, struggling like a car with three blown-out tires, think about what it means spiri-

tually, emotionally, and economically to the Muslim convert; kicked out of the home, disowned, and persecuted. Whatever economic possibilities existed in that family network for a job or career path is gone. So you really have two layers of economic deprivation. One is pervasive, due to the political/religious situation. The second is brought on, in addition to the first, due to becoming a Christian. Even if the first is somehow eased, the second remains in all its intensity.

These are our brothers and sisters. They are in as much need as the first century saints at Jerusalem for whom Paul collected money. Let's not neglect our brothers and sisters who have genuine need if we have any capacity to help.

Pastor Khoury's vision is that every Palestinian town would have a lighthouse for Christ. Here are some specific prayer focuses. 1. Pray for days of quiet and calm in the region. Any easing of tension lessens the stress the general population is under, makes movement easier, and life a bit more bearable for everyone. 2. Pray for open doors for employment. Pray for entrepreneurs or Christian businessmen to provide creative ways for the believers to earn a living. 3. As any missionary endeavor in a needy field, this work of God could use an increase in committed, consistent, financial support.

The church of God at Bethlehem, surrounded by hatred and hostility, planted in stony soil, is thriving and bearing fruit. Cut off from resources we take for granted and forgotten by many believers, it carries on the work of God. Jesus still lives in Bethlehem.