

The Decline of Christians in the Holy Land

by The International Community of the Holy Sepulchre

Headlines

- The Christian population in Jerusalem has dropped from 30,000 to fewer than 10,000 today
- Following population growth patterns, the Christian population in Jerusalem today should be around 100,000
- In the Old City of Jerusalem, around 2,000 Christians remain
- Whereas the population of Christians is growing slowly in Northern Israel, the population of Christians elsewhere in Israel and the Palestinian Territories is dropping
- The decline in numbers is due to the emigration of Christians

Why is the population declining?

In 2010, Pew reported that Christians made up 2% of Israel's population (a population of 150,000), 2.1% of Jordan (130,000), and 2.4% of the Palestinian Territories (100,000) (Pew Research Center 2015). Other estimates put the number of Christians in Israel and the Palestinian Territories as low as 1.4%, down from 11% in 1900 (Raheb and Kassis 2012, 11). In Jerusalem alone, the Christian population made up 20% of the Holy City's population in the middle of the twentieth century, but it only makes up 2% of Jerusalem today (Lev 2009).

This decline threatens the ability of the Churches to carry out their mission. The Churches and Holy Places of Jerusalem, the city of Christ's death and resurrection, are living sites of worship to a community nearly 2000 years old. They must not become mere museums.

Although the Christian population in Israel has grown slightly overall in raw numbers, it has shrunk in Jerusalem. Taking into account projected population growth over the last few decades, the Christian population falls drastically short of where it should be.

In the middle of the last century, the population of Christians in Jerusalem was 30,000 (Tsimhoni 1978, 57); today, it is fewer than 10,000 (Raheb and Kassis 2012, 11). Given the city's population growth, it is estimated that the population of Christians in Jerusalem should be around 100,000 today; instead the number is 1/10th of that (Sabella 2007, 4).

In the Old City of Jerusalem, church leaders estimate that only 1,000 - 2,000 Christian residents remain.

Taking Israel as a whole, the number of Christians is growing at a rate of under 2% per year, but it falls short of long-term national population growth estimates (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). Nearly 75% of Israeli Christians live in the north of the country, where this meagre growth is taking place (Ibid.). Further south the number of Christians in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, such as Bethlehem in the Palestinian Territories, is dropping.

Within the Palestinian Territories, the United Nations found that between 2000 – 2004, 2,000 Christians left Bethlehem. Similarly, the Palestinian Authority has stated that the population of Christians is falling overall (Reuters 2009). The Christian population in and around Bethlehem (inclusive of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala) is estimated to be 22,000; the population, at best, has stagnated due to emigration. Projecting data from the mid-20th century to 2007, the Christian population of these towns was expected to be 44,000 (Sabella 2007, 4), more than double the actual population in 2020.

In Gaza, the number of Christians has dropped severely. Less than 15 years ago there were 4,000 Christians in the city; today their numbers are below 700 (Trew 2018).

Raheb and Kassis, who have studied the population of Christians in the Holy Land, found that “the main factor for the decline of the Christian population [in the Holy Land] since the 1990s is emigration” (2012, 48). The US Department of State Report on International Religious Freedom echoes this. It highlights reports from church leaders that the lives of Christians “have become more and more unbearable” (U.S. Department of State 2020). The reasons for Christian emigration, as cited, include political instability, fewer economic opportunities, security concerns, and travel restrictions.

The problem continues today. A survey conducted by the Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture found that 28% of West Bank Christians said they would emigrate if they had the opportunity (Frings 2017).

Where are the Christians going?

Many Christians in the Holy Land have family ties abroad, which makes emigrating to the global west much easier. Historically, many emigrated to Chile following the Crimean War in the 1850s. Over the past 150+ years, the Chilean Palestinian population has grown in influence and number. The Palestinian Christian population in Chile is 800,000, larger than the number of Christians in the Holy Land (Ghosh 2013). There are significant numbers of Palestinian Christians in Europe and in North America as well. In the latter, populations are concentrated in Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles.

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