

Christians Continue Israeli Tours Despite Middle East Violence

Thousands journeyed to the Holy Land last fall despite State Department warnings against traveling to the Middle East

Despite U.S. State Department warnings against traveling to Israel, where the intifada between Israelis and Palestinians has escalated in the last several years, thousands of Christians journeyed there recently to show their support for the nation they say is crucial for the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

More than 4,000 Christians from 80 nations attended the annual Feast of Tabernacles celebration hosted by the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ) in October. Founded in 1980 to “bless” Israel and encourage Christian support for the nation, the ICEJ is represented in 100 countries and has 55 branches worldwide.

The Feast of Tabernacles, held at the Jerusalem Convention Center, is the ICEJ’s signature event and has become the largest tourist event in Israel. It includes a week of activities—from a parade of nations through the streets of Jerusalem to nightly music festivals to an outdoor worship concert in the desert near the biblical spring of Ein Gedi.

“Our [delegates] are driven by biblical considerations,” ICEJ Executive Director Malcolm Hedding said. “They believe that Israel’s modern-day restoration is evidence of God’s faithfulness to His promise to Abraham. ... They therefore come to bless what God is blessing and to share their love ... with

Israelis.”

Blessing and encouraging Israel was Texas pastor John Hagee’s reason for taking a group of 100 Christians to Israel in early November to tour holy sites. Pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Hagee said his 21st visit to the nation was the most “joyous, pleasant trip we’ve ever had.”

“I went to Israel to send the message to the government leaders and to the people on the street that Israel is not alone, and 70 million evangelicals in America support them,” Hagee told Charisma.

Demonstrating support for Israel and “[strengthening] the Israeli people through commerce and tourism” is what motivated televangelist Benny Hinn to lead a group of 250 supporters to the Holy Land Nov. 1-7.

“[Hinn] wants his partners to understand the unique biblical importance of the Holy Land and to experience the spiritual perspective that can only be gained by visiting this place,” Benny Hinn Ministries spokesman Don Price said.

The Israel Ministry of Tourism has reported a sharp decline in tourism since the fighting between Israelis and Palestinians intensified nearly four years ago. As some tourist-related businesses have been forced into massive layoffs or closure, Christian tourism has brought a ray of hope, ICEJ leaders said.

Hagee and Hinn said local leaders received them warmly, and the ICEJ reported that every Israeli prime minister except one has appeared at the feast since its inception.

On opening night of the feast, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon thanked the packed house for their support. "Your friendship is important to us," he said. "With your support, we can realize the hopes and dreams for peace, security and prosperity in the whole land."

Despite the Israeli government's welcome of Christian groups, Messianic Jews within the nation say they frequently experience hostility from officials, and members of the Messianic Jewish Alliance were not allowed to participate in the Jerusalem March, which coincides with the Jewish observance of the Feast of Tabernacles.

"When we went to the municipality of Jerusalem to apply for our permit, we were told we could not march," said Avi Mizrachi, pastor of Adonai Roi and founder of Dugit, a Messianic outreach center in Tel Aviv. "We took it as religious discrimination. ... Even a New Age cult was allowed to march and give out their brochures," Mizrachi added.

Messianic Jews in Israel are seen as neither Jewish nor Christian, but as traitors, Messianic leaders say. "Ideally it would be wonderful to see our Christian brothers and sisters, when they see discrimination against their Messianic Jewish brothers, [to] stand up and register ... their disapproval of such actions," said Joel Chernoff, president of the International Messianic Jewish Alliance, adding that relations between Christians and Jews in Israel have improved significantly in the last two decades.

Cameron Fisher in Jerusalem
with Adrienne S. Gaines