

Christians Want Israel's Holy Sites Under Jewish Control

Supporters say fair access and historic preservation at the heart of a petition to wrest jurisdiction from Muslims

Christians should have a big stake in who controls the biblical holy sites in Israel for the sake of the sites' survival and protection from Muslim encroachment, contend several Christian organizations that are promoting a petition campaign to make sure that control goes to the Israelis.

The International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ), the Christian-operated Bridges for Peace in Jerusalem, Christian Friends of Israel in Jerusalem, and The Galilee Experience in Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee hope to obtain

10 million signatures worldwide to influence decisions by the United States and Israeli governments that affect control of holy sites.

"If other ministries and organizations network with us, it can happen," said Eric Morey, who along with his Messianic Jewish wife Terry operate The Galilee Experience—a tourist stop on the shores of Galilee.

"I think this would have a moral and political impact on decisions by the United States, Europe and the United Nations by letting the world know that it's not just the Jews and the Palestinians involved here. The interests are much broader than that," said Morey, an American-born Christian who now

holds Israeli citizenship.

Similar to a declaration from Christians delivered to then Prime Minister Ehud Barak last November that included opposition to any division of Jerusalem, this latest petition urges the biblical and religious sites holy to Christians in Jerusalem remain under the administration and protection of Israel. More than 125,000 Christians from 122 nations signed the November petition, which was sponsored by the ICEJ.

Today, several sites face danger from Muslims, including the Church of The Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, Church of The Nativity in Bethlehem, Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, and others, said David Parsons, media spokesman for the ICEJ.

One traditional location of Simon the Tanner's House in Old Jaffa, for example, was seized by Muslim extremists several years ago, and they continue to defy court orders to vacate the site, Parsons said.

"The Christian Embassy is extremely concerned with the mounting pattern of Islamic encroachment and damage at biblical sites throughout the land of Israel," Parsons said. "We are convinced that it would be a tragedy to place any more sites of interest to Christians under the control of the Muslim-dominated Palestinian Authority. In contrast, the State of Israel has established an exemplary record of safeguarding freedom of worship and access to holy sites, and we urge Christians worldwide to support this petition."

Morey concurred that the record proves that Israel is much more fair to all religious faiths, whether Jew, Christian or Muslim, when managing access to holy sites.

"When Palestinians desecrated Joseph's Tomb in Ramallah, north of Jerusalem, during the ongoing intifadah Palestinian uprising last fall, Palestinian police stood by and watched," Morey said. "Jews in Tiberias near Galilee reacted angrily and tried to set fire to an old mosque here. But Israeli police intervened and protected the Muslim holy site. Morey's tourist business () is located across the street from the Tiberias mosque.

"In 1948, when Jordanians took over the old city, they destroyed the Jewish quarter and 58 synagogues and desecrated a Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives, using the head stones as latrine seats in Jordanian Army camps," Morey said. "Today, Palestinians control the Temple Mount and will not allow you to pray or carry a Bible there. Access by Jews and Christians is being denied."

Palestinians are using bulldozers to excavate a huge entrance to a new mosque on the Temple Mount, in an area known as Solomon's Stables, on the mount's southern section. "They are dumping off artifacts from Herod's Temple into a trash heap to destroy elements of the temple," Morey said. "The Israeli government is doing nothing about this, and, oddly, not even the archeologists are complaining."

Barak in March did meet with Islamic Waqf officials in Jerusalem to attempt to halt the excavations. More recently, Israeli soldiers have had their hands full trying to protect Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem during the uprising, which started last September when now Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount to worship at the Western Wall—one of the last remaining structures of the Jewish Temple from King Herod's and Jesus' day.

Regardless of ongoing peace negotiations, Morey says only the Jews have proven themselves fair to all faiths. "When the Israelis have control, as any tourist can attest, there is freedom of access for all religions and all faiths," he said.