

Christians Call for United Jerusalem During Feast of Tabernacles

Christians from around the world are gathering in Israel this week to show support for an undivided Jerusalem during the annual Feast of Tabernacles, which began Thursday.

The week-long celebration hosted by the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ) also marks the organization's 30th anniversary, which is to be commemorated Friday with a reception at the Zionist organization's international headquarters.

Some 6,000 Christians from nearly 100 nations are expected to convene in Jerusalem throughout the week, generating roughly \$15 million for the local economy.

"The Christian embassy has established a remarkable record of standing in support of Israel and a united Jerusalem over the past three decades, whether through our many humanitarian projects across the land, our advocacy efforts worldwide or our annual feast gathering in Jerusalem," said Rev. Malcolm Hedding, ICEJ executive director. "We look forward to celebrating our 30th anniversary with our Israeli friends and guests."

Dignitaries such as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Knesset Christian Allies' Caucus Chairmen MK David Rotem and Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat were to greet the attendees at various events throughout the week.

In opening remarks Thursday, Netanyahu thanked the Christian tourists for their consistent support.

"Year after year you come from over a hundred countries to

march through the streets of Jerusalem; and in doing so, you remind the people of Israel that we are not alone," he said in a video greeting. "You remind us that there are people across the world who recognize that in returning to Zion, the Jewish people have returned home."

Orthodox Rabbi Shlomo Rifkin and Benny Begin, a member of the Knesset and the son of former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, are expected to participate in the ICEJ's anniversary event Friday. Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke will close out the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as Sukkot, Wednesday with a service commissioning Christians to reach the nations with the gospel.

ICEJ leaders say this year's feast is dedicated to reaffirming Christian support for a united Jerusalem under Israel's sovereignty—an issue that led to the organization's founding in 1980. In that year the last 13 embassies left Jerusalem for Tel Aviv in protest of the Knesset's passage of the Jerusalem Law, which named Jerusalem the capital of Israel.

In response to the protest, 1,000 Christian visitors opened the ICEJ to show solidarity with the Jewish nation. ICEJ leaders say the message they sent three decades ago is just as relevant today. In March, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was widely condemned, including by U.S. leaders, for proceeding with plans to build apartments in disputed areas of East Jerusalem.

The Palestinians want East Jerusalem to be the capital of a future state, and the Obama administration wanted Israel to stop all settlement building in the area to restart peace talks. Last November Israel agreed to a 10-month partial freeze on new settlement building in the West Bank, but exempted Jerusalem from the moratorium because it considers East Jerusalem part of its united capital. The settlement freeze expires this weekend.

This year's feast is "in part to reinforce the founding principle of the embassy to stand with the 3,000-year-old Jewish claim and connection to the city," said ICEJ spokesman David Parsons. "We're expressing our commitment to that original mandate that we were given by the Lord."

The group's support for a united Jerusalem is being highlighted through a special bus tour to deliver a portable bomb shelter to a grade school near Gaza, and a visit to Shomron settlements Monday to discuss the impact of the building freeze. Feast "pilgrims" also will wear T-shirts that read "Jerusalem United" when they participate in the traditional Jerusalem March Tuesday.

Parsons said in the last three decades, the Jewish community has become more open to ICEJ and other Christian Zionist groups. In recent years, the ICEJ formed a partnership with the respected Holocaust memorial center Yad Vashem to operate a Christian desk that helps oppose anti-Semitism.

"Without building up that trust and proving your sincerity year in and year out, an institution like Yad Vashem wouldn't even consider [a Christian partnership]," Parsons said. "It's just an example of how far we've come."

The Feast of Tabernacles recognizes the time when in ancient Israel the nations were invited to worship God in Jerusalem with the Jewish people. Some modern Christian observers see the celebration as a prophetic foreshadowing of Zechariah 14:16, which describes a day when the nations that opposed Israel will worship the Lord in Jerusalem and celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

"We're here coming as a statement of faith," Parsons said, "saying we believe there will be a soon-coming Messianic age, when [the Feast] will be the most celebrated festival in the world. And we're just forerunners."