

Church Building in Israel Set Ablaze

An unidentified arsonist in Israel set fire to a Jerusalem church building that has long been a focal point for anti-Christian sentiment in a Jewish ultra-Orthodox-leaning neighborhood, church officials said.

On Friday (Oct. 29) shortly before 1 a.m., someone broke the basement windows of the Jerusalem Alliance Church Ministry Center and set fire to its bottom floors. An area resident noticed the fire and called the fire department, which arrived 20 minutes later and found the church basement engulfed in flames.

Firefighters extinguished the blaze, ventilated the smoke and left after inspecting the rest of the building, said Jack Sara, senior pastor of the church.

Smoke and the noise of the blaze had awakened 10 volunteer workers who were sleeping at the church's overnight facilities. The volunteers, who were visiting Israel from the United States and Denmark, went to a nearby hospital and were treated for smoke inhalation; they were released several hours later, church leaders said.

The church building sustained approximately \$85,000 of smoke and fire damage. The fire largely gutted the basement and destroyed recent renovations.

Sara said he had difficulty understanding how the arsonist could have carried so much hate; whoever set the fire had to know people were inside the church, he said.

"He not only intended to burn a room but to kill people," Sara said. "Whoever did it intended to kill people."

According to Sara, fire investigators initially said the fire was accidental. Then they shifted and said the fire was arson, only to change back again to their original claim that it was accidental.

Although the Israeli press reported that investigators had not formally announced their findings, Sara said investigators told him the fire was "very suspicious." Contrary to some reports, he insisted that there were no candles lit in the basement when the fire broke out.

Sara said his church, which hosts several congregational groups including expatriates and both Arab Christians and Messianic Jews, routinely receives threats. Referring to Orthodox Jews, militant Palestinians and even some Orthodox Christian communities, Sara said he receives hatred "from all sides."

It is not unheard of for ultra-Orthodox extremists to burn churches or Bibles in Israel. Not far from the ministry center is the Narkiss Street Baptist Church. In 2007, the church was damaged in a fire believed to be set by ultra-Orthodox Jews. The church building had been rebuilt on the site of a church facility destroyed 25 years prior by anti-Christian groups.

Other recent anti-Christian attacks in Israel have included the bombing of a Messianic Jewish pastor's home that left his teenage son clinging to life, the disruption of religious services by mobs of protestors and assaults on members of groups deemed "missionaries" by far-right, Orthodox Jews.

The Alliance Church building was constructed roughly 100 years ago. Palestine Bible College was founded at the building.

In 1948, after Zionist leaders declared the establishment of the State of Israel, the church opened other buildings in the Old City of Jerusalem to serve Arab Christians hampered from attending religious services by newly established political realities. Since 1967, Sara said, the building has been used

for many purposes.

Sara said his church will host a prayer meeting on Saturday (Nov. 6) to ask for protection of the congregation and for a blessing on its enemies.

In a statement provided to the press, Sara said he wanted the church building to be “a beacon of light reflecting God’s love to all people.”

“We will continue to serve the Holy Land residents from this place, proclaiming peace and justice for all human beings, declaring God’s love for all of our neighbors, friends and enemies,” he said.