

Israeli Arab Pastor Preaches in the Dangerous Backyard of Jesus

Steven Khoury grew up between Bethlehem and Jerusalem—the heart of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the focal point of the world’s greatest religious struggle.

In his youth, the Israeli Arab follower of Jesus experienced regular persecution. He was assaulted with metal chains and wooden sticks and recalls people tossing Molotov cocktails into his father’s church, catching the pews on fire. Several believers have been martyred, including Khoury’s uncle.

“There would be days when our church members walked out of the church doors, and rocks and stones would come flying at their heads,” Khoury, author of *In the Backyard of Jesus*, said during a presentation Monday at Charisma Media headquarters in Lake Mary, Florida. “On Sundays, we’d know who caught a rock the Sunday before because they would come to church with stitches in their heads.”

Today, the pastor of Calvary Church, located not far from Calvary where Jesus gave His life for the world, seeks prayer, assistance and a miracle to continue the work of spreading the gospel in the Holy Land.

As part of the “Save the Jerusalem Church” campaign, Khoury is raising funds to buy a multipurpose building in East Jerusalem to serve as a permanent location for his church. Khoury says his church has been “pushed out” of three rental properties recently and is now meeting at a Young Women’s Christian Association facility.

“Today, we are in a 90-day negotiation contract,” Khoury says. “The building owner is willing to sell us the building. We are

asking God for a miracle. To move in, the owner wants \$2.5 million, and then another \$2.5 million on a six-year payment plan. Thus far, God has given us \$1.7 million in commitments and donations.

"This will make us a lighthouse in the community. The only other time I know of that this has been done in the city of Jerusalem was in (the apostle) Paul's days when Paul went to the church in Corinth and the church in Rome and asked them to support the believing church in Jerusalem. If we buy this building, it would be the only Christian church in that part of Jerusalem."

At a time when many Arab people are coming to faith in Christ, Khoury says the "laborers are few and the harvest is plenty" in Israel. About 22,000 to 23,000 of Israel's 8 million residents are Arab or Jewish believers in the Messiah.

"So you don't take souls for granted," Khoury says. "You don't take baptisms for granted, and you start to understand that nothing comes easy. You have to be persistent and you have to be willing to pay a price to make a difference in the world we live in to build the kingdom to come."

Khoury, president of Holy Land Missions, says the permanent church will help his ministry continue to reach out to the lost in Israel.

"In Jerusalem, there is only room for 300 (Arab born-again evangelicals) people to go to church" Khoury says. "Our ministry serves about half that 300 and we have no (permanent meeting place). We are renting from the YWCA for three hours a week. That has been a struggle. Our outreaches are limited."

Only about a half-dozen Arab-speaking ministries exist in Jerusalem and only a few of those are actively evangelizing the Muslim community, Khoury says. Currently, the ministry has the only Bible leadership training and media ministries in that part of Jerusalem.

“There is a potential for us to have a Bible college, a worship center, a children’s outreach center and a safe house,” Khoury says. “Muslims in Israel are seeking Jesus through dreams and visions, but the problem is they don’t have a place locally to meet. Very few have anybody they can trust. Because Middle-Easterners are very relationship-oriented, they are always seeking places where they can sit down and research the Bible.

“They are seeing dreams and visions, but there are limited doors open to them. We want to be the big door. We have done it for 38 years in Bethlehem and Jerusalem and we want to continue to be that door that they can come through to sit down and learn the Bible.”

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