

Israeli Church Set on Fire

Jerusalem church leaders believe alleged arson case is latest attack on believers.

A fire destroyed three rooms in a Jerusalem building used by Christians in what church leaders are saying is arson and looks to be another attack against believers in Israel.

Jack Sara, pastor of Jerusalem Alliance Church, an Arab congregation, said organizations using the historic downtown building, which formerly housed the Israel College of the Bible, had previously been threatened – including writing on the wall that warned: “Go away missionaries” and “We don’t want you.”

According to Sara, 10 volunteers were sleeping in the Jerusalem Alliance Church Ministry Center when the fire started in late October. Upon arriving at the scene, congregants found a homemade firebomb and broken window. “Whoever did this intended to kill people,” Sara said.

The police, however, do not consider the fire to be arson. “There was no sign of breaking in whatsoever,” Israel Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said. Both police and fire investigators determined the blaze was accidental and caused by lit candles in the church. But Sara insisted there were no candles and that the church does not use them.

Built in 1914, the building stands on the border between downtown Jerusalem and an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood. It is used by several congregations and by Jerusalem Alliance Church as a discipleship training center. The church plans to install a security system and has hired an attorney.

“The police’s behavior in this matter is a cause for concern,” said attorney Calev Myers. “It does not seem like they have been cooperative with the leaders of the church or willing to

seriously investigate ... this fire.”

Another Jerusalem church fire in 2007, also suspected to have been started by Orthodox extremists, was never solved. The same church, Narkis Street Baptist Church in downtown Jerusalem, had its building burned to the ground by anti-missionary activists 25 years earlier. Sara believes the fire was religiously, not racially, motivated since several Christian ethnic groups use the building. Nevertheless, he said, Arab Christians “are no strangers to violence.”

“We get it from all sides – from other Christian denominations, Muslims and religious Jews.”

The church fire is yet another in a series of attacks that believers in Israel, both Jewish and Arab Christian, have faced in the last decade, mostly coming from Orthodox Jewish elements called “anti-missionaries.” The violence escalated in 2008 when a package delivered to a Messianic Jewish home in Ariel exploded, nearly killing 15-year-old Amiel Ortiz.

Myers’ organization, the Jerusalem Institute of Justice, noted the U.S. State Department’s 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, released Nov. 17, which found instances of discrimination against non-Jews and non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. Religious minorities in Israel, including evangelical Christians and Messianic Jews, face harassment, assault, abuse and persecution by radical Jewish activists and organizations, the report stated. It also claims that Yaakov (Jack) Teitel, arrested and charged in the Ortiz bombing, was a member of Yad Lâ€™Achim, an anti-missionary organization.

“We all know that if the FBI had not gotten involved, the police never would have apprehended Jack Teitel,” Myers said. “However, ... we can submit complaints. Israel does have a good appellate process for reviewing the behavior of policemen.”

After the fire, Messianic Jews and other believers in the city joined the Arab congregation to pray for justice and to

declare their unity as believers. Sara said it is time for the body of Christ in Israel to drop their differences and join together.

“It is a season to stand together and declare the unity,” he said. “We exist here, and we are going to stay here and serve our community. Even if they harm us, they are not going to scare us from serving the community.”