

**A Research Study Report on the  
Influence of Arab Christian  
Emigration on the Churches and  
Its Holistic Ministry in the  
Bethlehem Region of the Holy  
Land**

**Saliba Hanna Saliba Rishmawi**

**May 2007**

# Acknowledgements

I am thankful to God Almighty, and I am grateful to all who helped to make this research study a valuable undertaking. I also thank those who encouraged me to persevere and for their concern and contributions that made this research study successful.

First, I am grateful to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), the Global Mission Unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA/GMU), and Wartburg Theological Seminary (WTS) for granting me a scholarship that allowed me to pursue the Master of Arts degree in *Theology, Development, and Evangelism*.

Second, I am indebted and thankful to all the professors at Wartburg Theological Seminary. My appreciation goes particularly to the first person that I met in USA, Dr. David A. Ramse, my adviser and first reader, and to the Rev. Dr. Winston D. Persaud, my second reader. I also would like to thank Mrs. Else Schardt who provided critical grammatical evaluation of the entire research study.

Third, I am indebted, grateful, and thankful to my wife Raida Khalil Hanania Rishmawi, without whose courage and love I could not finish this research report. Her prayers and endurance in my absence have kept me vigilant, alert, and strong. I am grateful to all my fellow students and classmates and thankful to God for the care and love I received through all the difficult times.

# Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Tables	iv
List of Figures	v
Executive Summary	vi
Introduction	1
Purpose of the Study	3
Goal and Objectives of the Study	7
Context of the Study	7
Review of Related Literature	9
Methodology	23
Population	23
Data Collection	24
Field Data Findings	25
Location of Interviews	25
Interviewee Category	26
Gender of Respondents	27
Age Category of Respondents	28
Perceptions Regarding Arab Christian Emigration	29
Church Ministries for Improvement and Development	33
Consideration of Emigration	33
Church Ministries to Stop Emigration	35
Will Arab Christians Return to the Holy Land if there is Peace?	36
Reasons for Arab Christians to Emigrate and Sell Property	38
Church Ministries that Could Help Develop the Region	41
Concluding Comments	42

<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	
1 <b>Research Proposal</b>	<b>47</b>
2 <b>Map of Bethlehem Region</b>	<b>55</b>
3 <b>Time-line for Research in Bethlehem Region</b>	<b>56</b>
4 <b>Questionnaire in Arabic</b>	<b>57</b>
5 <b>Questionnaire Translated from Arabic</b>	<b>60</b>

# List of Tables

<u>Table</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	Population Statistics of the Arab Christians in the Holy Land	2
2	Christian Churches and Mosques in Bethlehem Region	23
3	Number of Respondents and their Location	26
4	Interviewee Category and Number of Respondents	27
5	Age Category of Respondents	28
6	Arab Christian's Emigration Reasons	29
7	Arab Christians Emigrate more than Muslims for many Reasons	31
8	Church Ministry and its Influence to Stop Emigration	35
9	Different Responses Concerning Considering Emigration	37
10	Emigrants will Return	38
11	Reasons Behind Selling Properties by Arab Christians	38
12	What the Church Could do to Help Develop Bethlehem Region	41

# List of Figures

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	The Apartheid Wall of Separation in the Region of Bethlehem	5
2	Gender of Respondents	28
3	Arab Christian Emigration Compared to Muslim Emigration	31
4	Would you Consider Emigration?	34
5	Will People Return if there is Peace?	36
6	Destruction of Christian's Home in the Region	39
7	Funeral of a Christian Martyr Killed in the Invasion	40

# Executive Summary

This research study was done in the Bethlehem Region, including the Palestinian Christian towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour, the home of half of all Christian Palestinians in the Holy Land. Respondents came from 15 churches in the three towns, from five different denominations in the region, and from two free churches.

The purpose of this study was to provide information concerning Arab Christian emigration from the Holy Land to different parts of the world and the challenges of what emigration to the Palestinian churches as a minority community. The population of this study was Arab Christians in the Bethlehem Region, particularly those living in the towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour. The hope is that Christian churches in the world, as well as in the Holy Land, will become aware of the challenges and dangers that Christians are face and be moved to help them stay as 'living stones' in the Holy Land. A sample of 144 individuals was interviewed for this study.

This study was conducted for partial completion of a Master of Art's degree in Theology, Development, and Evangelism at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The research study did not aim at giving solutions; instead, it was done to study the reasons that force people to migrate out of the Holy Land. This is the first research done in this field in the region of Bethlehem in the Holy land according to the interviewees. All the interviewee showed interest in this research

as a very important one for it is going to help the churches in the Holy Land to do a better ministry and to know the needs and the concerns of the people and think in a holistic way on how to change situation. In addition, it is hoped that it will encourage people by offering them a holistic ministry.

This report indicates that stopping emigration will come through giving Palestinians the right to have their own state, thus giving them dignity and true peace. The information for this study was gathered by conducting interviews with church pastors/priests, church leaders, church elders, three mayors, and Muslim Sheikhs. A data collecting instrument of 17 questions was developed and designed to answer the objectives of this research study.

The study suggests that emigration is a catastrophe that Arab Christians in the Holy Land face. Holistic ministry cannot take place where there are no Christians.

# Introduction

The Arab Christian churches in the Holy Land have lived in persecution all their history. Persecution has given the people power and strength to stay for 2000 years in the Land of Jesus Christ's birth, death, and resurrection.

Christians have lived in Palestine as a majority until Islam came to the Holy Land, beginning in the seventh century when the Caliph (prophet Mohammad successor) ruled the Holy Land, since that time the churches started to shrink, and now Christianity is a minority religion.

In the time of the Ottoman Empire many Arab Christians were forced to become Muslims and many villages became Muslim. There are still villages in the region of Bethlehem that have Christian names and have monasteries, yet all the people are Muslims. Arab Christians are often forgotten and neglected, for very few people in the world know about their history of more than 2,000 years in the Holy Land, the birthplace of the Christian faith.

The Arab Christian population in the Holy Land was 9.7 percent in 1917 and reduced to 2.8 percent in 1995. Table 1 shows the Christian population in the Holy Land and its percentages covering 78 years between 1917 and 1995. It should be noted that from 1948 to 1967 Israel occupied Palestine, excluding Jerusalem, West Bank, and Gaza Strip, and that the statistics from this period are from Jordan. It should be pointed out that the period of Israeli occupation

was 1967 till 1995 the statistics are from Israel. Not shown in Table 1, but should be noted, is that after 1995 statistics have been kept by the Palestinian Authority.

**Table 1. Population Statistics of the Arab Christians in the Holy Land.** <sup>1</sup>

Year	Total Number of Inhabitants	Christian Inhabitants	Christian to Total Percent
1917	642,850	62,550	9.7
1931	966,761	88,907	9.2
1944	1,673,071	135,547	8.1
1948*	438,000	35,000	8.0
1961*	-	46,000	-
1967*	596,000	38,000	6.0
1983**	772,000	39,000	5.0
1985**	895,000	40,000	4.5
1995**	1,400,000	38,000	2.8

\* The Arab Christian population, including Jerusalem

\*\* Not including the Arab Christian population of Jerusalem

Farah reported research done by the *Christian Research Institute* which showed that the Arab Christian population in the Holy Land, especially in West bank and Jerusalem, was shrinking because of emigration. The breakdown of emigration between the various Christian groups reported in 2003 was as follows: <sup>2</sup>

- Armenian Orthodox: 61 percent;
- Assyrian Orthodox: 50 percent;
- Arab Greek Orthodox: 32 percent;
- Roman Catholic (Latin): 28 percent;
- Greek Catholic: 15 percent;

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from two sources, Jaber M. Nassar, *The World-Christians and the Palestinians* (Beit Sahour, Palestine, 24 June 2000). 1, and from Fu'ad Farah, *The Living Stones: The Arab Christians in the Holy Land*, (Nazareth: Fu'ad Farah, ( 2003), 141. (This is the researcher's translation from Arabic).

<sup>2</sup> Farah, 147.

- Protestant 8 percent

It should be noted that the lower percentage figure of eight percent for Protestants in the above list is due to their higher economic status because the church has been active in employment and other tangible ways, like teaching them different languages and skills that helped them as Christian to emigrate and be able to live in the Western countries. Also, Christian schools gave an advantage to Palestinian Arab Christians who had early access to education. The middle class life style of the Christians has also helped Arab Christians leave the country for studies in the West. A consequence has been that Arab Christian children have married in the West where they studied. Later, their parents were invited to join them in the West where they might have a better opportunity for “the good life” and freedom, which they did not know in the Holy Land.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The emigration of significant numbers of Arab Christians is a challenge to the Palestinian churches. This emigration hinders holistic ministry of the church, for no development can take place without people. Israeli occupation, injustice, persecution, and lack of peace have made it difficult for the church to promote positive change and give hope for a better life in the future in the Holy Land.

This research was done in the district of Bethlehem, in the towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour. Farah notes that in 1997 there were 22,318 Arab Christians in the region where these towns are located. The total

Arab Christian population in the Holy Land was 52,635<sup>3</sup>. According to Dr. Bernard Sabella, “since 1948, some 230,000 Arab Christians have left the region.”<sup>4</sup> Emigration has influenced many Christians, making them lose all hope of living in their homeland while their loved ones are living abroad. This extremely hard situation and separation have made Emigration increase and is very difficult to stop.

Sabella further states;

According to Custody of the Holy Land, an order of Franciscans responsible for the Latin holy places in Israel and Palestine, more than 450 families have emigrated from Bethlehem area since last year [2001]. In Beit Sahour, one of the few towns in the Holy Land remaining primarily Christian, a recent survey found that 51.2% of respondents are considering emigration due to the difficult political conditions.<sup>5</sup>

A wall of separation built by the Israeli government on Palestinian land, much of it being built on land owned by Arab Christians, has made life very difficult and has caused many Christians to suffer (Figure 1). Many are no longer able to work in Jerusalem, and, on the other hand, one third of the land of the Bethlehem region has been confiscated, surrounded by Israeli settlements and jails that incarcerate Palestinians. The land that the wall is built on is the most fertile land in the region full of olive trees. For Christians, to be cut off from the holy city of Jerusalem is like being killed while still being alive. The region is

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Sabella, *Report on Christian Emigration: Palestine*. 23 January 2002. <http://cnewa.org/generalpg-verus.aspx?pageID=138#top>, (5 November 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

connected historically and emotionally with the holy city of Jerusalem, as Bethlehem Region has been a part of greater Jerusalem since the time of Christ.

**Figure 1. The Apartheid Wall of Separation in the Region of Bethlehem.<sup>6</sup>**



Arab Christians are victims; they are not able to work inside what are called Israel, and their land and Jerusalem in the heart of the country are not accessible, and people are finding it difficult to survive. Tsimhoni notes:

The Christians in Bethlehem have been particularly affected by closure of the West Bank, cutting the town from nearby Jerusalem. A majority of Bethlehem's Christians population is engaged in the pilgrim and tourist industry, which depends on free movement between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They are also deeply attached to Jerusalem culturally and economically since it houses the church headquarters as well as educational and cultural institutions. <sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Daphne Tsimhoni, *Israel and the Territories- Disappearance. Disappearing Christians of the Middle East*. Middle East Quarterly, Winter 2001. <http://www.meforum.org/pf.php?id=15> (5 November 2006).

Christians in the region of Bethlehem need to be connected with Jerusalem as they are related to Jerusalem like the heart to the body. Jerusalem, for Arab Christians, is like blood for the body. To separate Jerusalem from the Bethlehem Region is like killing the region, as Palestinians work, market, and do business with Jerusalem. Without the connection to Jerusalem, Bethlehem Region has fewer pilgrims, causing the people to struggle more, not finding a good life in their own home.

Palestinian Arab Christians feel that they are living in a big prison without any protection from attacks by the Israeli army and from Muslims who attack the Israeli army and settlements from within Christian neighborhoods. Fear of death is real, for Palestinians Christians have no weapons to defend themselves from the attacks of the Israeli army. What people are presently facing in the Holy Land is silent death that is taking place in front of the eyes of the whole world. The United Nations and the USA not help to force Israel to end its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. For example, in 2002, the Israeli army attacked the region of Bethlehem, and people lived under curfew for more than two months in front of the eyes of the whole world, and no one did anything to help.

Those attacks have forced many Arab Christians to leave the region. Arab Christians have emigrated in larger numbers since the second uprising (*Intifadat al-Aqsa*), the uprising of the Dome of the Rock, the second holiest Mosque in the world. This Intifada has forced Christians to feel as outsiders and that this second Intifada is not theirs; rather, it is the Muslims' Intifada.

## **Goal and Objectives of the Study**

The goal of this study was to gather information regarding challenges that the churches in the region of Bethlehem face because of Arab Christian emigration from the Holy Land to Western countries. It was hoped that the information gained through this research study would be a catalyst for the churches in the region of Bethlehem to start different ministries that would encourage Arab Christians remain in the country.

The objectives of the study were:

- To gather perceptions of key informants concerning holistic ministry and development in the region of Bethlehem;
- to gain perceptions concerning Christian emigration from the region of Bethlehem and its influence on Arab Christian communities, and
- to gather ideas on how churches could be instruments of change for developing sustainable communities in the region of Bethlehem.

## **Context of the Study**

Data collection for this research study was done in the region of Bethlehem, in the city of Bethlehem, and the two towns of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. These three communities make up almost half of the Christian population in the Holy Land. However, calamities, injustice, and inequality have forced people to migrate; many people have lost all hope for a better future in a

land full of hatred and enmity. Israeli occupation of Palestine has made it very difficult for many people to survive.

Emigration has become like a cancer that has affected all homes in the country, regardless of age, status, or location. To emigrate has become the dream of many young workers. The people of Beit Sahour, as well as in the other communities in the region of Bethlehem, face many of the same difficulties that other Palestinians face; difficulties that encourage emigration and make people think about emigrating and leaving the country.

# Review of Related Literature

Emigration has affected every Arab Christian home in the Holy Land. No home is not without people who are living in the diaspora. This emigration is making it more difficult for the people who remain in the Holy Land to manage their lives. The small minority is quickly losing their rights because they are losing becoming fewer in number each year that goes by.

Emigration has become a way of life for many families because of reasons like the following:

- Bad social and economical conditions in the Holy Land without any hope of positive change;
- Arab Christians are educated people who find life outside the country not too difficult because of their ability to speak different languages, and their being able to adapt, in a shorter time, to western traditions;
- Arab Christians in the diaspora are in need of their own community. This has made them encourage others to come in big numbers to have their own society in the west with their own traditions;
- Israeli occupation has made life very difficult, and impossible to have a good life that includes justice, peace, and equality, and
- Arab Christians are not self-sufficient; they rely on partners to survive. One part of it has to do with the Israeli occupation, and the other part is that salaries are not very high when compared to the education level of the Arab Christians.

In 1997 it was noted that the number of Christians in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, has been reduced radically over the last three decades. The Arab Christian-Muslim ratio in the Holy Land has reduced to two percent.

Unfortunately, emigration has continued. The signs seems to be pointing to the fact that in 20-30 years there will hardly be any Christian families living in the region of Bethlehem. Pilgrims and tourists might find themselves standing in front of the Holy Sepulcher Church only admiring the stones of the buildings only, because the 'living stones' will have gone. They might buy a ticket to enter the churches and see the "museum" exposed inside.<sup>8</sup>

Nassar notes:

Who is to be blamed for such a situation? Are they our co-citizens or is it the Israeli occupation? We are under the impression that Israel and those who support Israel have brought our Churches, our country and us to the present chaotic situation. And particularly those people in the USA and those in Germany.<sup>9</sup>

Tsimhoni notes that the second Intifada that began in September 2000 further deteriorated the position of the Christians in the Palestinian Authority, particularly those in the largely Christian town of Beit Jala. Armed Palestinian elements chose Beit Jala as their base for sniping at the neighboring Jerusalem settlement of Giloh. Beit Jala being a Christian town, the Muslim's goal was to direct international attention of retaliatory bombardment by the Israelis to this Christian town to force the Christian world to react. The Israeli reaction did come, and it forced a large number of Christians to evacuate and leave the country. Many headed abroad, and the Israeli authorities helped them by facilitating their emigration to the United States of America and Canada.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Nassar, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>10</sup> Tsimhoni.

What kind of choices do Arab Christians in the Holy Land have? There is no choice for people to stay and suffer; the only choice seems to be to leave and live a better life out of the Holy Land. It is a very difficult choice, for this land is to be kept for descendants. The land is in need of care and cannot be left because who will take care of it in the absence of its original owners?

Christians formed a salient portion of the Palestinian urban middle class; they had higher and Westernized education, smaller households, and a lower birthrate than the Muslims. Christians have been active in the Palestinian and Israeli political, social, and economic arenas by far more than their numerical strength in the Arab population, due to their greater Westernization, their knowledge of Western languages, and their better contacts with the West through their churches' headquarters and larger diasporas in the West.<sup>11</sup>

Tsimhoni further notes that another problem Arab Christian Palestinians in the Holy Land are face is Muslim men giving Christian girls a lot of promises and then marrying them without the agreement of their relatives. Christians are worried about what will happen to their daughters, especially as the number of Christian girls is seven times more than that of the men in the region of Bethlehem. Many of the Christian girls don not have a chance of getting married, so they think that it may be no problem to marry a Muslim. For Arab Christians, it is a taboo to intermarry with Muslims.

Another problem Tsimhoni identifies is that of was the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in the country that preaches that Palestine is for Muslims and

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3.

that Christians are guests. It is actually the opposite, as Arab Christians welcomed Muslims and have never been visitors in their own country.

On the other hand, the Israeli government closed the region by building the apartheid wall that made the life of Christians become very difficult.

Tsimhoni writes:

The Christians of Bethlehem have been particularly affected by closure of the West Bank, cutting the town from nearby Jerusalem. A majority of Bethlehem's Christian population is engaged in the pilgrim and tourist industry, which depends on free movement between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They are also deeply attached to Jerusalem culturally and economically since it houses the church headquarters as well as educational and cultural institutions. The establishment of the PA [Palestinian Authority], with its borders separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem, further isolated and eroded the position of Bethlehem's Christians. Like all the West Bank residents, Christians of Bethlehem need hard-to-go permits to enter Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

Tsimhoni adds that major problems that Arab Christians in Bethlehem face now is the isolation of not having direct connection with the holy city of Jerusalem, and thus are not able to engage in the pilgrim and tourist industry. Even when pilgrims do come to the region of Bethlehem, they are not able to buy from the region because they have already bought in Israel what they need.

The Christians in the region are worried that fundamentalism of Muslims is affecting Christians and forcing them to leave the country. Tsimhoni points out that the situation differs in Bethlehem and its neighboring villages of Beit Jala and Beit Sahur. Bethlehem has stagnated economically for pilgrimage in particular is

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.,7.

the heart of all businesses. This has been the case especially since the recent years of closure of the site of the Church of the Nativity, which has kept a traditional religious character<sup>13</sup>.

Christians have become increasingly apprehensive of the growing influence of Islamist groups and the Palestinian Authority attempts to accommodate them. Christians fear an imposition of Muslim religious regulations on their public life such as the prohibition on the drinking of alcoholic beverages and restrictions on women's public dress. Christians also are wary of the purchase of land by Muslims because it has been taken by Muslims, in the past and no one has stood up for the Christians. This threatens to reduce the Christian influence in the Bethlehem area.<sup>14</sup>

Often Arab Christians are forced to give their land to Muslims almost at no cost. This has made it difficult for Christians to protect their own land from attacks by Muslims or the occupying Israelis.

This research study also showed that land had been taken from the original owners, and many cases are presently pending in the courts without any solution. The chief of the Qumsia Clan in Beit Sahour, one of the largest Arab Christian clans, was interviewed by the researcher who stated that 105 parcels of land were stolen from the original Arab Christian owners. While Arab Christian owners were abroad, groups of Muslims had taken 12 houses from Arab Christian families.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

In Beit Sahour the story is quite different. Christians are still 85 percent of the population, the largest Christian town in the Holy Land. However, overall the Christian population in the region of Bethlehem is 41 percent of the total number of the Christians of the Holy Land.<sup>15</sup> The results of this research show that if the situation is not changed, more than 81 percent of the Arab Christians will emigrate between now and 2020. Yet, if the country were to have peace, more than 81 percent would come back according to the respondents.

The story of emigration is not a new story, it has happened before, and continues to happen throughout the world. Human beings are always searching for a better life and that force people to emigrate, whether they like to or not.

In the Old Testament Book of Ruth, a very good example of emigration from Bethlehem took place. In that context, famine was the reason for emigration to Moab, the Land of the Arabs. Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons were refugees in the land of Moab. Their sons married Moabite women, similar to what is happening among the Palestinians refugees today who have found a home outside of their homeland.

The Book of Ruth shows how the prevailing situation forced Elimelech to leave with his family to the eastern part of the Jordan River to find refuge. Unfortunately, they were not able to go home together, in the same way as they had come together, for death had taken from them all the men of the family and Naomi was left with her two daughters-in-law who were Moabites; a real

---

<sup>15</sup> Farah, 141.

catastrophe. Palestinians and many others have been forced to leave their homes and have become refugees. The Palestinian story does not end even after 60 years of occupation. The situation is made worse daily and now people emigrate because of a different kind of famine, that of home account of the Israeli occupation that has taken with it all hope for a better future.

Although emigration is a normal process among nations of the world, the Arab Christian emigration from the Holy Land is a unique one. It has its own special causes and different consequences. Emigration for such a small Christian community, such as that of Beit Jala, represents one of the major constraints regarding its population growth, and is threatening its future and existence in the Holy Land, the origin of Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Romell Soudah notes that, "The Palestinians Christians are the descendents of the first community of believers who loved, believed in, and followed Jesus Christ."<sup>17</sup> Palestinian Christians are a mixture of many different ethnic groups but are one in the body of Christ. They have maintained their faith in Christ Jesus for more than 2000 years. They have all the right to live and own their land and homes as their ancestors did for 2000 years.

One Arab Christian women who was interviewed in this research study touched on the issue in her prayer and pain. She was 94 years old and lives in Beit Sahour. Her three sons and two daughters, with their families, were living in different parts of Europe and USA. I will never forget this old Palestinian

---

<sup>16</sup> Romell Soudah, "Across the Political and Economic Divide," *Corner Stone*, 43 (Winter 2007): 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Christian woman who looked to heaven and lifted up her hands and shouted, addressing God with a shout full of sorrow and pain and helplessness, “Heh Ya *Allah*”. This was a prayer coming from a person who had lived a very difficult life:

Where are you from your people? Where are you God Almighty? Why are you silent, yet you see all the injustices that your people in your Holy Land are living in? God, why have you left us alone in front of this wicked enemy that has no mercy? God, why do you allow them to disgrace you and your people in the Holy Land? You see your people leaving your country searching for your peace and grace. God, you were born in Bethlehem from the virgin Mary and became a human being in order to save us and redeem us and give us a new and better life? Jesus the Christ was born as a very poor person who knew the pain and suffering of the people, and now the people that live in Jesus’ land are leaving it, going helplessly in search for your peace. What shall I say, God forgive me? Or shall I say, remember us the Christians of the Holy Land, and have mercy in us. Jesus Christ, are you still here in Bethlehem with us, or have you decided to leave with the people that left to the diaspora? Why can we not see your steps moving with our steps? Have you forsaken us for the sake of the people that crucified you...and now they crucify us?

Heh Ya Allah, Hear the voice of my prayer and save our people. Heh Ya Allah, come to us and save us, we are tired of unjust and unrighteous rulers. We are still your people that fear your Holy name, come and help us and bring us back to the Land of our fathers, and let us enjoy your peace that comes from heaven and which no one can destroy. This is my prayer to you, oh God, on behalf of my nation that live under occupation. Oh Lord, I lift up to you the churches and the mosques in the country, in front of the destroyed houses, and the killed sons, in front of the uprooted olive trees and plants, and in front of hospitals. What is your answer oh God?

Emigration is not a new thing in Palestine. In the Old Testament we see the Hebrews who lived in the diaspora for a long time and became slaves of Pharaoh. Joseph was sold in to slavery into Egypt. Later, during time of famine, God told Joseph’s father, Jacob, and his family, to go down to Egypt and that He

would make of them a great nation and that He also would go down with them (Genesis 46: 1-27).

Emigration happens because of different reasons, such as famine, war, and exile. Still, the outcome is the same, resulting in people leaving their motherland and going to other lands and making it their home.

Abraham the father of faith left his home country and city, and emigrated with his family and all that he owned and went to Canaan, the land that God promised to give him and his descendents forever. Abraham emigrated and left behind clan, land, property, and people, and went to a land that he knew nothing about. Almighty God rewarded Abraham and made him a blessing to all the nations of the world, and caused him to be the father of many nations (Genesis 12).

People seem to like emigration, so is that how God created humans? If one looks at the nations of the world one sees that people are so mixed that one cannot find any place that has a singular race. The difficulty comes when emigration becomes harmful to a community. What should people do to stop it? Is it possible to stop? Is it possible to forbid people from emigrating?

His Beatitude Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch and Archbishop of Jerusalem, spoke at Sabeel's 6<sup>th</sup> international conference concerning "Forgotten Christians of the Holy Land." He said:

The question of emigration, the question of our survival and of our future, involves our own re-education. It is a question of a coordinated catechesis so that all of us become equally aware of our vocation and mission in this land. This means a catechesis that

teaches our faithful that a truly authentic Christian life begins with worship in the presence of God. It begins with a presence before God, a presence that sends us out from the church to our society, to the heart of the conflict. It requires that we see ourselves as partners in all of the suffering that is taking place, in all of the heavy sacrifices that are being made.<sup>18</sup>

Sabbah is the representative of the Council of Churches in the Holy Land.

He is trying to deal with this important issue with awareness, not only for the people across the world, but for the Christians in the Holy Land. He added concerning emigration from the Holy Land,

This also means a catechesis that teaches all those among us who are involved in direct activity that their actions must be intimately linked to moments of worship and of presence before God, inside or outside the church. They must not leave the church with denominational, sectarian, negative, or fanatical attitudes and behaviors, but with a love and strength similar to God's own love for all his creatures of all religions and nationalities, as well as with a more decided contribution to and sharing in all aspects of the life of our society.<sup>19</sup>

The Arab Christian emigration from the Holy Land, as Romell Soudah explains, "The most alarming factor affecting the Christian population and threatening its future existence is the steady stream of emigration."<sup>20</sup> He adds that the number of Christian emigrants has increased in the last few years; all of this has to do with the political and economic situation that Christians in the West Bank are living in at this time. He points out that emigration of males is more than that of females; the majority of the emigrants are singles who go abroad to study

---

<sup>18</sup> Michael Sabbah, "Forgotten Christians of the Holy Land?" *Corner Stone*, 43 (Winter 2007), 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

and never come back again. He says that Christian emigration in the West Bank is characterized by family type emigration marked by a very large number of followers. This type of emigration is the most harmful type and affects the whole community.

Statistics show that people who are processing papers in Palestine to leave represent 4.5 percent of the total Christian population, which is double of the annual Christian population natural growth rate. Soudah continues,

Christian emigration is highly influenced by political factors. Considering that the political situation in the area is marked with spiraling conflict and instability, this cannot but be a pressuring and pushing factor encouraging emigration. Israeli drastic measures against the Palestinians affect and touches every sphere of life in a most negative manner. Christians, as Palestinians Arabs, have suffered as a consequence. Many individuals and families voluntarily emigrate in search of freedom and security as well as to ensure income and a secure future for their children.<sup>21</sup>

Soudah recognizes that emigration is a normal process among all nations in the world. Christian emigration from the Holy Land is a unique one. Because it is the emigration of small Christian communities it means that this emigration has a negative effect on population growth and threatens the very existence of those small communities. Soudah explains further that now is the time for the Christian churches to act in order to reduce emigration and eliminate its effects. Churches must act and do everything possible before holy places become mere monuments. The reality is that Christians are living under Israeli occupation like

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 15.

Palestinian Muslims. The Israeli confiscation of Palestinian lands has taken a sizable portion of Christian private property in the Bethlehem area where 50 percent of Christians in the West Bank live. The people that depend on the land therefore think seriously of emigration.

Another important factor according to Soudah, is the separation wall that cuts off the Bethlehem area from its vital connection with Jerusalem, and other Palestinian areas. This means that people are separated from their own family members and from services such as health centers, schools, and universities.<sup>22</sup>

In a *Report on Christian Emigration: Palestine*, there was a quote from Uriya Shavit and Jalal Bana in *The Secret Exodus*. This was reported in the Israeli newspaper called, Ha'aretz, on 3 October, 2001. The emigration phenomenon is a well-kept secret that has been made worse for the Arab Christians who are really suffering with no recognition. No Palestinian journalist has written about the wave of emigration, which is still increasing. It is really a serious problem that needs to be resolved. The Palestinian Authority doesn't want the story of Christian emigration to become public as they feel it will harm the country. The problem is that because no one is writing about the phenomenon of Arab Christian emigration from the Holy Land, no one really knows what the situation is.<sup>23</sup>

The number of people living below the poverty line has risen to 65 percent of the total population of the Holy Land. High incidence of debt, such as

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Report on Christian Emigration*, <http://www.emigrations.net/pr04.htm#footnote5> (July 2002).

mortgages and car payments, is now financially strangling many Christians from the Bethlehem Region. Only the wealthiest Christians can afford to wait-out the situation. Who will support the needy when seemingly everyone within the Christian community faces an acutely damaging economic struggle? Thirty-two percent of the Palestinian population (more than one million people) receive assistance from the United Nations. <sup>24</sup>

Numerous Christian homes have been damaged (366) or destroyed (12) by indiscriminate rocket fire in Beit Sahour alone. This kind of life, no one can tolerate. More than 95 houses in Beit Jala have been hit by gunfire and has been the “front line” against Israeli attacks. Soldiers have confined residents at gunpoint, destroyed personal property, and used the homes as strategic outposts, often for snipers, and have occupied other Christian homes in these areas. Even though the soldiers have now departed, victims of these incursions suffer from constant fear, especially the youth. <sup>25</sup>

Christians are having difficulty in defining their future in a bipolar society composed of opposing religious fundamentalisms, Judaism, and Islam. There is increasing social tension between Jews and Muslims, like the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*. Christians feel left out of this ‘religious’ conflict even while they must continue to pay its economic and political consequences. Arab Christians are the neglected suffering minority.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Arab Palestinian Christians are part of the Palestinian people, yet how do they reconcile their conflicting political and religious identities? This question and related ones are especially difficult for the younger generation and for the Arab Christians living in Israel who struggle in their own home country and who exist as a minority within a minority.<sup>26</sup>

Christian institutions in the Holy Land and worldwide must continue to address the Christian community's basic material needs including housing, job opportunities, emergency relief, medical treatment, and social assistance, in order to give needed strength to persecuted Christians in the Holy Land. In addition, church leaders must take proactive steps to preserve the Holy Land's Christian presence, not only for the sake of Christians remaining in the land, but, also, to preserve the integrity of the birthplace of the Christian faith for generations to come.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

# Methodology

## Population

This study was guided by a research proposal (Appendix 1). The population of this study was Arab Christians in the region of Bethlehem, including the city of Bethlehem and the towns of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. A map showing the area of field research is shown in Appendix 2. Field research was done during the months of June through August 2006 in the region of Bethlehem (Appendix 3).

**Table 2. Christian Churches and Mosques in Bethlehem Region**

Name of Church/Mosque	Frequency
Greek Orthodox Church-Beit Sahour	23
Roman Catholic Church-Bethlehem	16
Greek Orthodox Church-Bethlehem	15
Greek Orthodox Church-Beit Jala	13
Roman Catholic Church-Beit Jala	11
Roman Catholic Church- Beit Sahour	11
Syrian Orthodox Church-Bethlehem	9
Evangelical Lutheran Church-Beit Sahour	8
Christmas Lutheran Church-Bethlehem	7
Reformation Lutheran Church-Beit Jala	7
Mosques	6
Emanuel Pentecostal Church	5
Greek Catholic Church-Bethlehem	4
First Baptist Church	4
Greek Catholic Church-Beit Sahour	3
Armenian Orthodox Church	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>144</b>

Table 2 shows the churches and Mosques from which interviewees were selected. Seven churches were located in the city of Bethlehem; three churches were located in Beit Jala, and four churches in Beit Sahour.

## **Data Collection**

Quota sampling was used to gather data from leaders of 15 churches and six mosques. The number of leaders interviewed from each church was somewhat in proportion to the institution's membership. However, one leader from the six mosques was interviewed. Personal interviews were conducted guided by a questionnaire written in Arabic (Appendix 4). Appendix 5 is an English translation of the questionnaire. There were a total of 17 questions asked, five of which were quantitative questions about the person being interviewed, and the remaining 12 questions being qualitative and pertaining to their perceptions addressing the key purpose and objectives of the study.

The intention was to conduct a total of 150 interviews. However, the Israeli authorities had arrested Hamas Imams/Sheikhs, which resulted in only six of them being interviewed. Therefore, the actual number of interviews was 144. Of this were 103 church elders, 17 pastors/priests, ten nuns, three mayors, five Bethlehem University professors, and six Muslim Imams.

## **Field Data Findings**

The goal of this study was to gather information regarding the challenges that churches in the region of Bethlehem face in the hope that the information gained would help holistic ministry of the church and enhance its development in the region of Bethlehem, especially the city of Bethlehem and the towns of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour.

Interviews were conducted in 15 churches in the region of Bethlehem. This included two free churches, First Baptist Church and Emmanuel Pentecostal Church. Pastors, priests, church elders, and mayors of the three cities of Bethlehem region were interviewed. Being the largest congregation in the Holy Land, 20 Greek Orthodox elders in Beit Sahour were interviewed. The intention was to interview 19 Sheikhs, but, unfortunately, the Israeli army had arrested them. However, six Sheikhs from Hammas, namely the Director of Islamic religion, the Director of the mosques, the Director of tithe, and three mosque Sheikhs were interviewed.

### **Location of Interviews:**

Table 3 shows the location and the number of the interviewed people in the three Christian communities in the region of Bethlehem, namely Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour.

**Table 3. Number of Respondents and their Location**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Bethlehem	66
Beit Sahour	47
Beit Jala	<u>31</u>
<b>Total</b>	<b>144</b>

### **Interviewee Category:**

Among the various churches, the large majority of the respondents were church elders (Table 4). Also, professors of Bethlehem University, the largest Christian university in the country, were included because they have been involved in church ministries from different denominations. Also, mayors were seen as very important for the Ottoman Statisco (the Church's agreement concerning the holy places and the division of positions between different ancient denominations) in the Holy Land. This Statisco states clearly that if the mayor is Roman Catholic, the assistant must be Greek Orthodox. Presently, the Bethlehem mayor is Roman Catholic. In Beit Jala and in Beit Sahour the mayors are Greek Orthodox. All are involved in church ministries. The Palestinian authority recognizes Christians as the original people of the region, and thus the mayors of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour must be Christians.

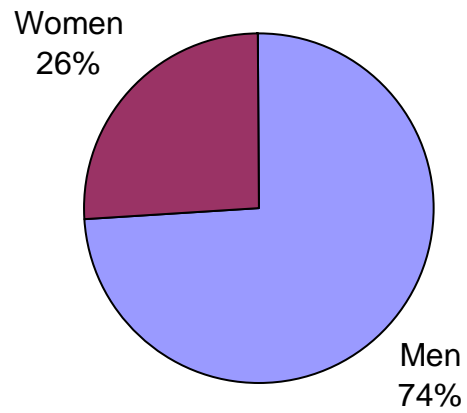
**Table 4. Interviewee Category and Number of Respondents**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of Interviewees</b>
Church Elders	103
Priests/Pastors	17
Nuns	10
Sheikhs	6
Professors	5
Mayors	<u>3</u>
<b>Total</b>	<b>144</b>

### **Gender of Respondents:**

Seventy-four percent of the interviewees were men, as the majority of church elders were men (Figure 2). It was felt important to interview nuns as well, for their ministry includes helping the churches in different ways, particularly in being in solidarity with people at the time of need. These nuns were Arab Rosary nuns, the only Arab Catholic order in the world.

**Figure 2. Gender of Respondents**



**Age Category of Respondents:**

The largest age category of respondents was those between 41-50 (Table 5).

**Table 5. Age Category of Respondents**

Age Category	Frequency
81-90	3
71-80	10
61-70	34
51-60	31
41-50	36
31-40	22
21-30	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>144</b>

## Perceptions Regarding Arab Christian Emigration:

There were many reasons stated by the respondents as to why Arab Christians leave the country and migrate (Table 6). The most frequently stated reason for Arab Christian emigration was because of no money due to there being no work. The second most frequently stated reason was Israeli occupation. Other reasons given included the political situation, instability of the country, and injustice.

Responses indicated that people loved their country, yet they were powerless in regard to the forces they were facing. One of the interviewees said that emigration was a very dangerous issue and that all the churches of the world must help rescue the Palestinian Church before it is too late.

**Table 6. Arab Christian's Emigration Reasons**

<b>The Reasons for Emigration</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
No money, no work	32
Israeli occupation	26
Looking for good life because of bad life	23
Empty the land, Christians will disappear	22
Catastrophe	20
No hope for better future	8
To whom are we going to leave the country?	7
No peace	6
Christians are living stones	6
All the people of the world wish to live here	5
No help from the WCC	4
Witness for Christ	4
No security	4

Other responses given as to why Arab Christians emigrate included:

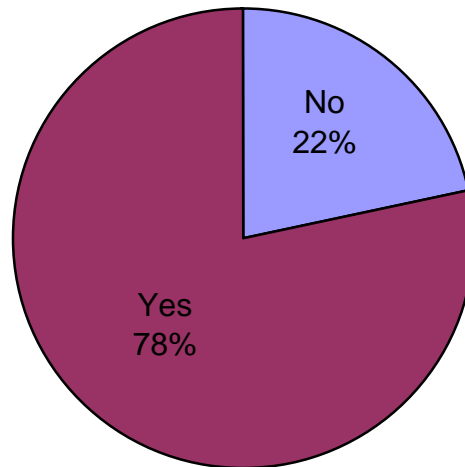
- I prefer to die here than migrate;
- Christians are powerless;
- God created us here;
- Persecution by Jews and Muslims;
- A very dangerous thing;
- If Christianity will disappear they will be no pilgrimages to the Holy Land;
- It is bleeding;
- Emigration is causing suffering to all;
- It is a challenge to the church;
- It is easy to hear that Christianity is going to die in its homeland;
- A great problem, no solution.
- Churches will become museums;
- No way to stop it;
- It is a continuous pain;
- Christians need care from the world's churches, and
- It is the worst thing that happened to our country.

Many Arab Palestinian Christians have become refugees, yet no Christian has wanted to live in these camps because they are more educated and are wealthy. Thus, they can mix with the Christian population of their adopted land. This is what has happened in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

## Arab Christian Emigration Compared to Muslim Emigration:

The majority of the interviewees (78 percent) perceived that Arab Christian emigration was more than that of the Muslims (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Arab Christian Emigration Compared to Muslim Emigration**



In Table 7, respondents stated some of the reasons they perceived as to why Christians were emigrating at a greater rate than Muslims from the region of Bethlehem.

**Table 7. Arab Christians Emigrate more than Muslims for Many Reasons**

<b>Christian Emigration</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Christians are living high standard life.	48
Christian Emigration is equal to Muslims.	31
Arab Christians have relatives in the West	17
Christians are looking for better life.	12
No work opportunities.	10
Western churches are not taking care.	9
Christians are open to western culture.	8
Persecution from Jews and Muslims.	8
Israeli occupation.	7

Many interviewees noted that Arab Christians had been educated in Christian schools that taught languages and western culture, which had made it easier for them to leave the country. Also, many young people had gone to the West for further studies and had never returned, some having married in the west and were no longer interested in coming back to their home countries.

Given limited work opportunities in the country, persecution from the Israeli occupation, and Muslim fundamentalism, it was perceived that Palestinian Arab Christians were living a difficult life in their home in country, not being able to change anything.

Other responses for Arab Christians emigrating at a greater rate than Muslims, included Jews and Muslims taking Christians' land and houses. Many of the Arab Christians, although not living in villages, have land outside the cities. Very few still farm because they have no time for that, thus no connection with

the land, making emigration easier for the Arab Christians. The majority of the Arab Christians are middle-class citizens who would like to improve their lives.

This is quite different from the responses of the Muslims. The Muslims are a much lower percentage of those emigrating out, although when Israel occupied Palestine and established the Israeli State in Palestine, many Muslims became refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These people remained in the country. Others went to Jordan, the second largest Palestinian community, Syria, and Lebanon. These three countries are serving as host to many Palestinians who are living in camps in terrible conditions.

The mayor of Bethlehem said concerning this important issue that the United Nations was not trying to help the oppressed Palestinians to have their rights and end all the problems that came because of Israeli occupation to Palestine. Refugees are people who had no choice in what to do or where to go; they are forced to leave or die. Since 1948, Christians have emigrated from the Holy Land in large numbers: forty percent left after the occupation, for life had become very difficult and the solution appeared to be through emigration.

## **Church Ministries for Improvement and Development:**

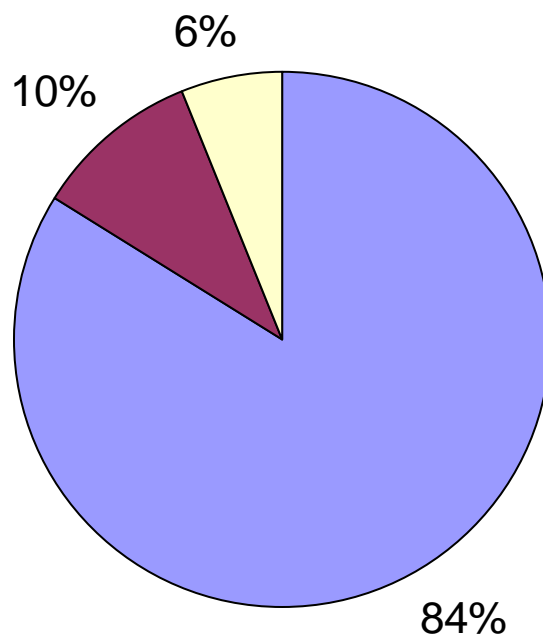
A question was asked, “What church ministry could help to improve and develop the region?” Responses obtained were very vague and unclear. About 20 respondents said that the church could provide employment. Another few said to provide housing, and three respondents said to develop companies. It was also suggested that the church should start insurance companies, such as health. About eight persons said the church should do “all things” for improvement and development.

## **Consideration of Emigration:**

A question was asked, “Would you consider migrating from the Holy Land?” They were then asked to follow-up their yes or no response by providing an explanation for their answer. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (84 percent) said, “No,” they would not emigrate (Figure 4). Of those who said “no,” they would not emigrate, 60 percent of them mentioned the difficulty of surviving with inadequate employment or no salaries for months. Respondents sometimes perceived that they had no choice; that they had to take their families far from harm and danger to a secure place where they might have justice and no suffering or persecution.

Other explanations given included “no work here”; “why to stay” ;“no hope for a good future”; “no peace”; “Israeli occupation,”; “I advise people to stay but no one is willing to hear me” and “Palestine is the most beautiful country on earth, how can I leave it?”

**Figure 4. Would You Consider Emigration?**



Arab Christians are living a suffering life and they are not able to change the situation. It was noted by some respondents that if there was peace, justice, and equality they would never think to leave the country, since home is the best and is the home of Christian faith and the hearts of all the Christians are there.

## Church Ministries to Stop Christian Emigration:

A question was asked, “According to you, what kind of ministry could the church do to stop Christian emigration from the Holy Land?”

**Table 8. Church Ministry and its Influence to Stop Emigration**

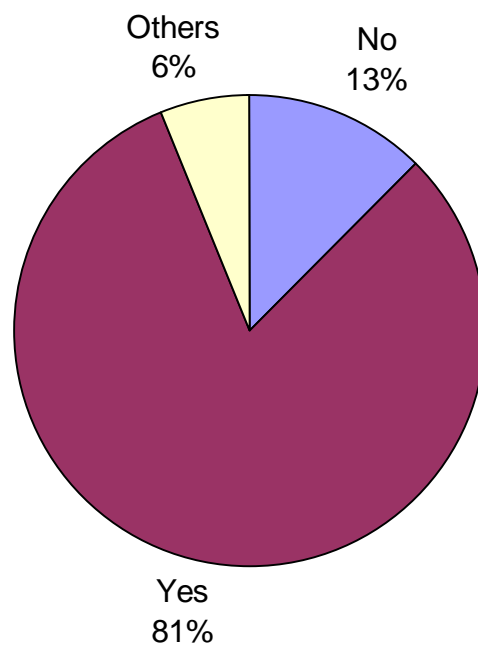
Churches Ministries to Stop Emigration	Frequency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Church companies</li></ul>	100
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Work opportunities</li></ul>	26
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teaching</li></ul>	15
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preaching</li></ul>	6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Peace, justice, equality, freedom, and dignity.</li></ul>	96

Twenty-six respondents cited providing work opportunities as a way to stop emigration from the Holy Land (Table 8). Churches are the most important authority for the Palestinians Arab Christians, as they indicated feeling secure when the church gives them work. Thus 100 respondents asked the church to provide companies. It was also suggested that churches should take into consideration teaching (15 recurring responses) and preaching (six recurring responses).

## Will Arab Christians Return to the Holy Land if there is Peace?

Another question asked was, “Do you think if peace returns, people will come back to the Holy Land?” An overwhelming majority (81 percent) said “yes” and 13 percent said “no”, because they had established themselves and it would not be easy to return and start from the beginning (Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Will People Return if there is Peace?**



It was perceived that for the people who left the country in the last 15 years, it would be easier for them to return. But for people who migrated before

this time, it may not be easy to come back as their children and they themselves, would have adapted to their new life.

Some of the explanations given in regard to the question about perceptions of people returning to the Holy Land are given in Table 9.

**Table 9. Different Responses Concerning Considering Emigration**

<b>Considering Emigration</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
It is impossible to live here in such a terrible life.	33
I will never leave my relatives, land prosperities and life.	28
I love my country.	25
I am old I can't leave my country.	15
Bad life.	8
God called me in this country; I am going to serve Him and His people here.	8
I like to stay in the city of Jesus Christ.	8

Respondents said that it was very difficult to have peace. Thus, it would be quite impossible to presume that people will return home, for they left their homes because of economic and political injustice.

Table 10 shows a large majority of the respondents (117) who were hopeful that emigrants would come back after having peace and equality in the land.

**Table 10. Emigrants Will Return**

<b>People Will Return if there is Peace</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Yes</li></ul>	117
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No</li></ul>	18
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responses</li></ul>	9

## **Reasons for Arab Christians to Emigrate and Sell Property**

The respondents gave various reasons as to why they thought Arab Christians would sell all their property and emigrate (Table 11). Eighty-three respondents said the reason Arab Christians were selling property was because they needed money to travel and start a new life in the West.

**Table 11. Reasons Behind Selling Property by Arab Christians**

<b>Christians Sell Properties</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
To have money to buy tickets and travel and start their lives in the West.	83
No work, no money.	26
No security.	9
No hope.	9
No peace.	7
Bad life.	6

Other responses not mentioned in the table above included,

- We are a small minority;
- Muslim fundamentalists are growing very fast;
- we are looking for a better life;
- remember Israeli occupation;
- some Muslims are stealing Christians land and houses, even properties;
- no loyalty;
- fear;
- no hope for good future;
- afraid of poverty and racism;
- persecution, and
- looking for freedom.

Arab Christians in the region of Bethlehem have suffered from the Israeli army. At the time of invasion, it attacked more than 100 Christian homes in the region (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Destruction of Christian's Home in the Region of Bethlehem**



It was not easy for these Christians to remain after they had lost their homes. A respondent noted that Muslims were shooting from the Christian neighborhood to force the Israeli army to attack Christian homes. Thereby Muslims sought force the West to do something to stop the Israeli attacks (Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Funeral of a Christian Martyr Killed in the Invasion**



## Church Ministries that Could Help Develop the Region:

A question was asked, “What could the church do to help develop the Bethlehem region?” Equality with Muslims and Jews was given as a response by 29 interviewees (Table 12). Peace and work opportunities were also cited as ministries the church could support.

**Table 12. What the Church Could do to Help Develop Bethlehem Region**

How Can the Church Develop the Region	Number of Responses
Equality with Muslims and Jews.	29
Peace.	23
Work opportunities.	20
Involvement in the Palestinian government.	14
Education, teaching and preaching.	8

Other, non-recurring responses to the question of how the church could help to develop the Bethlehem region included,

- Housing
- end racism
- awareness
- hospitals
- keeping a Christian identity in the country
- scholarships
- Christian unity
- create new leadership in the church and government
- companies
- Christian centers
- dialogue

- end of occupation
- Christian unity
- health insurance
- end persecution
- freedom
- rights

## **Concluding Comments**

In conclusion to the questionnaire, the respondents were invited to share any other comments they may have had. All 144 respondents said that the Israeli occupation was the main reason given for all the calamity and catastrophe that was being faced by the respondents. They noted that peace, justice, equality, and dignity were the most important things needed for holistic ministry, because when there is peace, the economy will improve, as peace gives a chance for people to work and prosper. Five respondents said that the need was only for one, Jesus Christ.

Respondents noted that Arab Christians in the region of Bethlehem were not able to maintain life in such a terrible situation with the Israeli occupation, and that this was what was forcing people to leave their country. Eighty-one persons interviewed said that no changes would take place if the situation would stay as it is now; they would like to see changes, and only then would they stay and live in dignity. Forty-four respondents were worried concerning the future of Christian witness in the Holy Land, and they asked the interviewer to send a call to all the churches in the world to stand for the rights of the Palestinians to live in peace in

their own country. Eighty-one interviewees said that if Christians in the world would not help the Arab Palestinian Christians, they would be responsible for the disappearance of Christianity from the Holy Land.

One hundred interviewees were very angry that the land of Christ was witnessing the death of Christianity. They noted that it was time for all Christians of the world to do something with the forgotten Arab Christians of the Holy Land, and that Christians of the world should do something to make it possible for Arab Christians to survive in the land of Christ, the land they had lived in for more than 2000 years.

Ninety-five interviewees asked the churches of the world to help the churches in the Holy Land to develop its own companies to employ as many Arab Christians as possible. Forty-two respondents touched a very important issue that church health and life insurance should be made available to all Christians, thus enabling them to survive. Eighty-two interviewees said that the churches in the West were responsible to help the Palestinian church to build houses in the region for all Christians from all denominations as a priority, and to help them to own homes or through providing monthly payments if they were renting the houses while they own them.

# Conclusions

These conclusions are based on the findings of the field research data, which were obtained through the interviews with the population of the study.

- Arab Christian emigration from the Holy Land is twice that of Muslim emigration.
- Peace is the first and most difficult challenge; it is the first step in finding the true solution to problems in the Holy Land.
- Justice, freedom, dignity, and equality are what will make people stay.
- Work opportunities and freedom of transportation in the country will encourage people to stay in the Holy Land.
- Housing is a key that will make people feel secure. Arab Christians want to own their own homes.
- The whole world should hear the voice of Arab Christians of the Holy Land and to find all means possible to end this catastrophe.
- Churches should provide health and life insurance.
- The Palestinian church is the mother of all churches, and this mother is calling all daughter churches in the whole world to help it survive.
- The church helped Arab Christians to leave the country by not taking enough care of their needs, and by not teaching the importance of the land and its connection to the Arab Christians. Many are now living in urban towns and cities and not in villages. This has made it easier for them to emigrate from the country.
- Arab Christians are the original people of the country and they are living a very difficult life, not being able to change anything. They see the only solution as emigration.

# Recommendations

The following recommendations are given based on the conclusions of this research study.

- The church in the Holy Land, and the world, should be the voice of the voiceless. The Palestinian church is to call on all people of faith in the world to remember their brothers and sisters in the Holy Land.
- To address the important issue of emigration, the churches of the world should take the responsibility to help Palestinian Christians survive with dignity in the Holy Land.
- Providing work opportunities and housing should be a priority, enabling people to stay in the Holy Land.
- Apartments for the new generation should be built, for the majority of the emigrants are new generation.
- The churches in Palestine and in the world pressure an end to Palestinian/Israeli conflict and Israeli occupation, encouraging USA and the world to stand against Israeli injustice and stand for the right of the Palestinians.
- With the help of partner churches and the government, fund projects that will teach and preach against emigration, making it possible for people to live a decent life that will encourage Arab Christians to stay in the Holy Land.
- Provide health and life insurance through the church to encourage Arab Christians to stay in the Holy land, enabling them to take care of themselves.
- Teach the Christians of the world about emigration and the danger that Palestinian Christians are facing as a minority in their own country.
- Use media to inform the world concerning Arab Christian emigration, its danger and its negative influence on church development in the Holy Land.
- Promote holistic ministry by churches influencing the presidents and rulers of the world to spread peace in the Holy Land.

# Bibliography

- Farah, Fu'ad. *The Living Stones: The Arab Christians in the Holy Land*.  
[Nazareth](#): Fu'ad Farah, 2003.
- Nassar, Jaber M. *The World –Christians and the Palestinians*. Beit Sahour,  
Palestine, 24 June 2000.
- Sabbah, Michael. "Forgotten Christians of the Holy Land?" *Corner Stone*, 43  
Winter 2007.
- Sabella, Bernard. *Report on Christian Emigration: Palestine*. 23 January 2002  
<http://www.cnewa.org/generalpg-verus.aspx?pageID=138#top>  
(5 November 2006).
- Sabella, Bernard. Report on Christian Emigration: Palestine. July 2002,  
<http://www.emigrations.net/pr04.htm#footnote5>,  
10 April 2007.
- Soudah, Romell, "Across the Political and Economic Divide," *Corner Stone*, 43  
Winter 2007.
- Tsimhoni, Daphne. *Israel and the Territories-Disappearance. Disappearing  
Christians of the Middle East*. Middle East Quarterly, Winter 2001.  
<http://www.meforum.org/pf.php.id=15>. (5 November 2006).

**A RESEARCH PROPOSAL TO STUDY  
HOLISTIC MINISTRY IN THE ELCJHL AND  
THE INFLUENCE OF EMIGRATION OF  
ARAB CHRISTIANS ON DEVELOPMENT OF  
THE REGION OF BETHLEHEM IN THE  
HOLY LAND**

**SALIBA HANNA SALIBA RISHMAWI**

**MAY 2006**

# Executive Summary

The aim of this research study is to provide information concerning the emigration of Arab Christians from the Holy Land to different parts of the world and how emigration challenge to the Palestinian church as a minority community. The fear is that no Christians will remain in the Holy Land; that means that the holy ancient Churches will become museums. This fear is causing the Church to think about the reason behind emigration from the country and how it hinders the development of the church and its mission. To have sustainable development, there is a need to think of holistic ministry as a way to change situations and give Christians a chance to survive in dignity and peace.

The ELCJHL is the only Arabic Lutheran church in the world. It began as a mission effort in 1841; its mission is not to create a new church in the area, but rather to protect the minority Arab Christians and to serve the poor and provide proper education and free health care for all Palestinians in the Holy Land.

This study will take place in the region of Bethlehem, in the cities of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour. It is hoped that this research study will help the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land to serve God's people holistically with dignity and honor. It is hoped that this research study and will provide rich information that will help the church witness to God through its services and ministries.

## **The Purpose of the Research Study**

The purpose of this research is to study challenges the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) is facing because of emigration from the Holy Land. This study will look at how the emigration of Arab Palestinian Christians affects the church's holistic ministry and development, and, it is hoped provide information useful for the ELCJHL to develop a sustainable strategy.

This research will study the challenges that the region of Bethlehem is facing; to help the ELCJHL have additional information concerning this challenge as an unavoidable challenge with which the region of Bethlehem is faced. It is hoped that this research study will also help the ELCJHL to develop a holistic ministry in the Christian community of the region of Bethlehem. The Church is the community of faith. This means that church development has to do with the Christian community, or, said in other words, the future of the church and its development rely wholly on the Christian community.

Over the last three years, Arab Christians have migrated out from Palestine in large numbers. Statistics shows that almost 50 percent of the Arab Christian population have migrated from the Holy Land to other parts of the world, such as to the USA, Europe, South America, and Australia. The reason for this emigration is due to the difficult political situation, which includes high unemployment of Arab Christians. The Israeli occupation of Palestine hinders the church's ministry

and its development. This is the true challenge that people and the church in Palestine are facing.

The Christian Churches in Palestine are facing a very difficult situation, and they are trying to develop the community to help the people live in peace and to have a decent life. To have a holistic ministry, the church needs to enable the people to remain in the country. It is a very difficult situation when there is no peace in the country.

## **Objectives**

The goal of this study is to gather information regarding the challenges which the ELCJHL faces, with the hope that the information gained would help the holistic ministry of ELCJHL, and enhance its development in the region of Bethlehem.

The objectives of the study are:

- 1) To gather perceptions of key informants concerning holistic ministry and development;
- 2) to gain perceptions concerning Christian Emigration from the region of Bethlehem, and its influence on the Arab Christian community, and
- 3) to gather ideas on how the ELCJHL could be an instrument of change for developing sustainable communities in the region of Bethlehem.

# Methodology

The population of this study is Arab Christians in the region of Bethlehem, including the city of Bethlehem and the towns of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. A map showing the area of field research is shown in Appendix 1. Field research will be undertaken during the months of June through August 2006 in the region of Bethlehem. Personal interviews will be conducted with the leaders of ELCJHL, leaders of other Christian faith communities, and Sheiks.

**Table 1. Study Population.**

<b>Churches/Mosques</b>	<b>Pastor/ Priest/ Sheik</b>	<b>Lay Leaders/ Elders/ Youth</b>
Lutheran –Beit Jala	1	6
Lutheran –Bethlehem	1	6
Lutheran-Beit Sahour	1	6
Greek Orthodox-Beit Jala	4	12
Greek Orthodox-Bethlehem	4	12
Greek Orthodox-Beit Sahour	4	12
Roman Catholic-Beit Jala	1	10
Roman Catholic-Bethlehem	1	10
Roman Catholic-Beit Sahour	1	10
Assyrian Orthodox-Bethlehem	1	8
Armenian Orthodox-Bethlehem	1	5
Assembly of God-Beit Jala	1	4
Local Church-Beit Jala	1	4
First Baptist Church-Bethlehem	1	4
Emmanuel Church-Bethlehem	1	4
Mosques	<u>19</u>	<u>    </u>
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>107</b>

A quota sampling procedure will be used to gather the information from the population in Bethlehem region (Table 1). The quota includes leaders from

16 Christian churches and 19 mosques<sup>28</sup>. The number of leaders being interviewed from each Christian institution is somewhat in proportion to the number of its membership. However, only one leader from each of the 19 mosques will be interviewed. Data collection will be done from the first week of July through the second week of August. Appendix 2 gives the time-line for the summer research activities.

The total interviews from the three towns of Bethlehem region, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour will be 150. A questionnaire (Appendix 3) has been developed to aid in gathering the information through personal interviews. All interviews will be conducted in the same way, using the same introductions, as well as explanation of the interview, thus increasing data validity. The questionnaire will be written in the Arabic language and then translated into English.

## Budget

Category	In-Kind (ILS <sup>29</sup> )	ILS	Total (ILS)	\$US
<b>Income:</b> <b>WTS</b>		914.	914.	200.
<b>Expenses:</b> <b>Photocopy Data Collecting</b>	155.			
<b>Instrument</b>		665.	665.	146.
<b>Travel to Interview Locations</b>				

## Organization Information

<sup>28</sup> It is hoped that the Sheiks, by being included in this study, will also provide valuable information as to the reasons for Christian migration out of the Holy Land, and because it may be too painful for Christian families to speak of separated family members who are living abroad.

<sup>29</sup> One U.S. Dollar = 4.57 New Israeli Shekel (April 21, 2006)

The Lutheran mission efforts began in 1841 when a German and joint British-Anglican, and Prussian bishopric was established in Jerusalem. In 1860, Johann Ludwig Schneller, a Lutheran, founded the Syrian orphanage<sup>30</sup> in Jerusalem. The Anglicans and Lutherans worked together as one body until 1886 when the Prussian Lutherans went their own way, partly due to political and theological differences in Europe between the Prussian and the English churches. The German Lutherans focused their efforts on social work and education at a time when the British Anglicans were emphasizing conversion. Today, the ELCJHL continues this call to witness through general education and health education and health care for Palestinians regardless of faith, ELCJHL provides for the spiritual needs of the Arab Lutheran community.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) is the only Arab Lutheran Church in the world. It is a small Church with an estimated 2,000 members. It offers many services to the Palestinian community. Its mission is not to create a new church in the country, but, rather, to take care of the poor and to provide proper education for Christians and Muslims in Palestine. The ELCJHL has six congregations in Jordan and the Holy Land with churches located in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, and Ramallah, including one congregation in Amman, Jordan.

God has called the ELCJHL to proclaim the Gospel within an Arab context in the Holy Lands. Although the ELCJHL is a minority church, it does not have a

---

<sup>30</sup> Also known as the Schneller Lutheran Orphanage.

minority complex. Rather, the ELCJHL sees itself to be salt in the society, as God calls us to be.

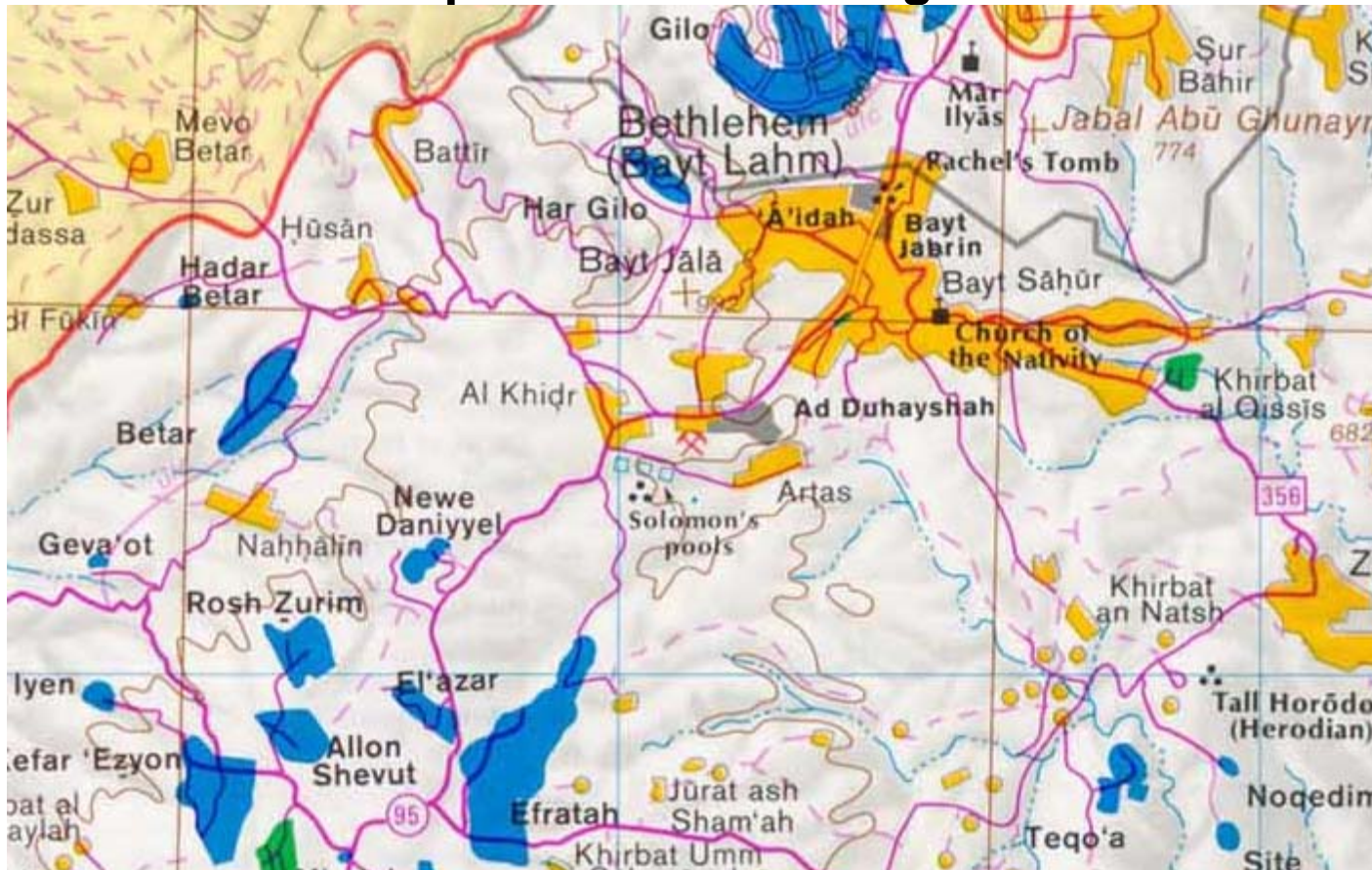
## **Conclusion**

This research study is important because of the challenges that ELCJHL and the ecumenical Church in the Holy Land are facing. It is hoped that this research study will help the Christian communities in the Holy Land see its challenges and seek ways to improve the situation.

It is painful to see Christians migrating from the Holy Land as it has had adverse effects on the community. The bad political situation has made life very hard, which has resulted in people having no work. There is a lack of peace and no justice existing in the country, which has forced people to migrate from the country. The research seeks to gather information from Arab Palestinian Christians and Sheikhs on how people respond to this challenge.



## Map of Bethlehem Region



### Appendix 3

## Time-line for Research in Bethlehem Region

Activity	July					August			
	3-8	10-15	17-22	24-29	31-5	7-12	14-19	21-26	28-2
<i>Pilot Testing Data Collecting Instrument</i>	■								
<i>Orthodox+ Catholic+ Lutheran Churches In Beit Jala+ Mosque</i>		■							
<i>Local Church+ Assembly of God in Beit Jala</i>			■						
<i>Orthodox+ Catholic+ Armenian+ Syrian in Bethlehem+ Greek Catholic+ Mosque</i>				■					
<i>Orthodox+ Catholic+ Greek Catholic+ Lutheran in Beit Sahour+ Mosque</i>					■				
<i>First Baptist Church+ Emmanuel Church in Bethlehem</i>								■	
<i>Other Mosques</i>								■	
<i>Begin writing Research Report</i>	■								

## Appendix 4

### استبيان حول الخدمة الشاملة في الكنيسة الإنجيلية اللوثرية في الأردن والأراضي المقدسة وتأثير هجرة المسيحيين العرب على تطوير منطقة بيت لحم في الأراضي المقدسة

(1) إسم الكنيسة أو الجامع :

---

(2) الموقع/العنوان:

---

(3) المكانة الإجتماعية/المسمى الوظيفي (للمقابل):

---

(4) الجنس:	(ذكر)	(أنثى)		
(5) العمر:	( > 20 سنة )	(30 – 21)	(40 – 31)	(50 – 41)
	(60 – 51)	(70 – 61)	(80 – 71)	( < 80 سنة )

(6) ما هو رأيك بالهجرة المسيحية من الأراضي المقدسة ؟

---

---

---

(7) لماذا نرى أن هجرة المسيحيين أكثر من هجرة المسلمين؟

---

---

---

(8) برأيك أي خدمة كنسية ممكن أن تساعد في تحسين وتطوير المنطقة (محافظة بيت لحم)؟

---

---

---

(9) من أي طبقة اجتماعية تحديداً هم المهاجرين من الأراضي المقدسة؟

---

---

---

(10) هل تفكر بالهجرة من الأراضي المقدسة؟ (نعم) (لا) إشرح لماذا؟

---

---

(11) برأيك، أن نوع خدمة كنسية تستطيع الكنيسة أن تعمل لوقف الهجرة المسيحية من الأراضي المقدسة؟

---

---

(12) هل تعتقد إن استتب السلام، أسيرجع الناس إلى الأراضي المقدسة؟ (نعم) (لا) إشرح لماذا؟

---

---

(13) ما هي أسباب هجرة المسيحيين العرب وبيعهم لأملاكهم قبل الهجرة؟

---

---

(14) كيف تستطيع الكنيسة أن تساعد الناس على البقاء في البلاد؟

---

---

(15) ما هي احتياجات الناس في هذا الوقت؟

---

---

(16) ماذا ينبغي على الكنيسة عمله كي تساعد في تطوير محافظة بيت لحم؟

---

---

(17) هل يوجد أي تعليقات أخرى تود اضافتها ومشاركتنا بها؟

---

---

## Questionnaire Translated from Arabic

1. Name of Church or Mosque  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Location \_\_\_\_\_
3. Interviewee Category  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Sex \_\_\_\_\_
5. Age Category (Under 20) (21-30) (31-40) (41-50) (51-60) (61-70) (71-80) (Over 80)
6. When you think of Arab Christian Emigration from the Holy land, what do you think of?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Why is Christian emigration more than that of Muslims?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. What Church ministry could help to improve and develop the region?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Specifically, who are the people (categories) that migrate from the Holy Land?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Would you consider migrating from the Holy Land? (YES) (NO) Explain your response: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. According to you, what kind of ministry could the Church do to stop Christian Emigration from the Holy Land?

---

---

12. Do you think that if peace returns, people will come back to the Holy Land?  
[YES] [NO] Explain your answer:

---

---

13. What are the reasons that Arab Christians migrate and sell all their properties?

---

---

14. How can the Church help the people to remain in the country?

---

---

15. What are the needs of the people in this time?

---

---

16. What could the Church do to help develop the Bethlehem region?

---

---

17. What other comments do you have to share?

---

---