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What Jerusalem would look like **without** indigenous Christians



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FACTSHEET 2

What Jerusalem would look like without indigenous Christians

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FACTSHEET 2

What Jerusalem would look like without indigenous Christians

This fact sheet forms part of the 'Preserving the Palestinian Christian Community' project produced by Palestinian Vision ('PalVision') with the support of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS). The project has sought to raise awareness about Palestinian Christians living in the Holy Land and to highlight challenges they face, including in particular threats to their religious identity and continued presence in Jerusalem. This factsheet, along with others in the series, aims to provide a basis for advocacy work and to inform discussion about action required to protect and preserve the Palestinian Christian population in the Holy Land.



INTRODUCTION

This factsheet imagines a future in which no indigenous local Palestinian Christians remain in the Old City of Jerusalem. The people making up today's small Palestinian Christian population are referred to as "living stones," according to the First Epistle of Peter in the Bible,¹ because their heritage derives from the first Christians who lived in Jerusalem during Jesus' time. While for many a future without local Christians in Jerusalem is unthinkable, year on year, the indigenous Palestinian Christian population continues to shrink due to a wide range of issues that make it ever more difficult for the community to live, work and prosper in the Old City of Jerusalem.

This declining Christian population trend is not new. The Holy Land Christian "living stones" population has continued to decline since the beginning of the 20th century due to a range of political, social and economic factors. These issues are widely known, including by church leaders from across Christian denominations, clergy members, Christian institutions, academics and Christians both within the Holy Land and around the world.

What has been lacking, however, are agreed positions on what can, and should, be done to halt and reverse the trend and thereby preserve Jerusalem's Christian population. Local Christians in the Holy Land have endeavoured to address their concerns about the future by looking inwards and examining their role within their churches' respective strategic missions and goals. The Local Christian "living stones" are fully aware of the remarkable assistance that the Church provides to the Palestinian community, and in particular the local Christian community, toward the goal of overcoming their problems and struggle. Notwithstanding this important assistance, it has not succeeded in reducing, much less reversing, the declining number of local Christians, in particular within the City of Jerusalem.

This factsheet provides background and current data on the Christian presence in Jerusalem and concludes that without targeted interventions, the continued trend of decline suggests there will no longer be any remaining indigenous local Christians living in Jerusalem within fifty years.

¹ 1Peter: 2-5. Holy Bible, New International Version, Colorado: Biblica: 2011.





Is it possible?

Sadly, if the current political, economic, cultural and religious issues remain unresolved, it appears inevitable that the Christian population will disappear from the Old City of Jerusalem altogether. Despite seeming unthinkable, given the close attachment that Christianity has maintained to the Old City of Jerusalem for centuries, history from the Holy Land, wider Middle East and around the world confirms that many religious and non-religious communities have entirely migrated or disappeared. Some declined gradually over time while others were forcibly displaced from their place of origin. This has resulted in unique and precious cultures and heritage being lost altogether. Estimations that this may happen to the Christian population of Jerusalem within fifty years are based on current population data and the rate of decline, but this rate may even accelerate if conditions deteriorate further. Importantly, however, collective action, if taken in earnest, could significantly slow, and even reverse, this decline trend.



Christians in the Holy Land

The phrase “indigenous Christians of the Holy land” refers to the local Christian community, which comprises a part of the Palestinian people still living in the Holy Land, as opposed to those Palestinians who were displaced or emigrated to different countries. Part of this indigenous community descends from, and is heir to, the first primitive Holy Land Christian community that lived in the First Century AD, experienced the death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the coming of the Holy Spirit and believed in Jesus Christ as their Saviour. They were the first people Jesus called “living stones” in the First Epistle of Peter² and “salt of the earth”³ in the Gospel of Mathew. In the beginning, these early Christians originated from Jewish, pagan, and Arab communities. Over time, they were joined by additional Christians who arrived from around the world to settle in the Holy Land. This resulted in new elements of culture and heritage gradually merging into the original Christian community in the Holy Land over time.

According to several non-governmental Christian organisations,⁴ local indigenous Christians in the Holy Land number approximately 150,000 currently, which comprises 1.2 percent of the total population in the Holy Land. Around 100,000 live in the northern part of the Holy Land and 50,000 live in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. The approximately 9,800 Palestinian Christians living in Jerusalem constitute less than one percent of the total population of the City of Jerusalem. They are concentrated mainly in the Old City of Jerusalem, and in surrounding neighbourhoods that include Beit Hanina, the Mount of Olives and Tantour areas, Beit Safafa and Sharafa. These Christians belong to different Christian denominations: Roman Catholics constitute approximately 55%, Greek Orthodox 23%, Greek Catholic 9%, 4% Syrian Orthodox, 4%, Armenian 3% and others total 3%.⁵ The total indigenous Christian population in Jerusalem currently stands at the lowest point it has been for 125 years, when that number comprised 20 percent of the total population of the city of Jerusalem.⁶

² 1Peter: 2-5. Holy Bible, New International Version, Colorado: Biblica: 2011.

³ Ibid1. Mathew: 5-13

⁴ There are some problems using the governmental statistical information because Israel and some other organisations add the foreign Christians who come and work in Israel as part of the Christian population.

⁵ Akroush, G., (2019). “To integration or to immigration” A community-based study on the needs, challenges, aspirations, and the way forward for Christian youth in Jerusalem. Pp 14-15. Jerusalem

⁶ Hoade, E. OFM, (1984) “Guide to the Holy Land” P. 94, Franciscan Printing Press, Jerusalem



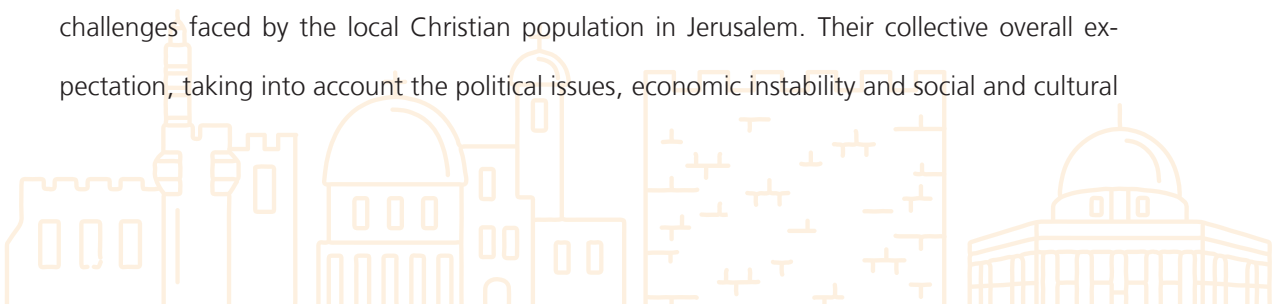
Will the Christian Indigenous community disappear from Jerusalem?

Holy Land Christians combine a unique mix of local Christians, who were born and have lived in the country for centuries, as well as descendants of immigrant Christians from different nations and civilisations who came and settled in the Holy Land more recently. Additionally, the “Church as Entity” consists of 13 Christian denominations represented by church officials and clergy that came from different countries to serve in parishes, churches and shrines. Their collective presence plays an important and ongoing role in keeping the Christian faith alive.

Research interviews canvassed each of these groups separately and revealed significant differences in their perception and understanding of the issues facing Holy Land Christian “living stones,” including views on the potential disappearance of these Christians from the area. Research query responses from Christians who are part of the “Church as Entity,” including clergy, officials in the Church, Christian related organisations and those who benefit from the Church, indicated near universal denial of the supposition that there may be no Christians living in Jerusalem in the future. These responses appeared to be based on a “Church as Entity” ideology that imagines a continued Christian presence in Jerusalem and holds a strong conviction that this presence will never disappear. This view appears to be consistent with the central “Church as Entity” priority, goal and mission to keep and maintain its power through support from Christians all over the world. Thus, the “Church as Entity” never counted the “living stones” and survival of the local Christian population as its main objective.

When researcher interviews turned to the local Christian community, the “living stones” nearly universally expressed view was that one day in the future there will be no Christians living in the Holy Land. Local Christians appear to believe that the churches will be emptied of “living stones” and that Christian shrines will become museums for tourists. These views appear to be based on a deep uncertainty about the future and a loss of hope for change to arrive that would enable these local Christians to visualise their children and grandchildren remaining and thriving in the Holy Land, and within the Old City of Jerusalem in particular.

The final research interviews addressed academics, researchers and scholars who base their analysis on facts, historical experiences and statistics to understand and assess the current challenges faced by the local Christian population in Jerusalem. Their collective overall expectation, taking into account the political issues, economic instability and social and cultural





challenges, was that the indigenous Christians will disappear from Jerusalem within the next fifty years and could disappear from the West Bank and Holy Land altogether.⁷

Many other analysts and outside observers appear to be unaware of the severity of the challenges and therefore cannot imagine the Holy Land without its indigenous Christian “living stones.” This perception persists despite history clearly revealing how other cultures, religious communities, and common language groups have vanished from their geographic places of origin in the past.

⁷ The total indigenous Christian population in Jerusalem is currently the lowest it has been for 125 years, when that number comprised 20 percent of the total population of the city of Jerusalem. Hoade, E. OFM, (1984) “Guide to the Holy Land” P. 94, Franciscan Printing Press, Jerusalem

What will Jerusalem look like without indigenous Christians?

Indigenous Christian “living stones” are an integral and essential part of the Palestinian people and an invaluable component of the historical, cultural, social and national fabric of the Holy Land. If their presence continues to decline and they are lost, the damage inflicted will adversely impact not only the Christian religion, but also Palestinian culture, tradition and the overall Palestinian identity of the City of Jerusalem.

Many special traditions are attached to Christianity. The disappearance of the indigenous Christians in Jerusalem will have an especially profound and negative impact on the following:

Christian Religious Celebrations: Many Jerusalem churches stand on sites connected to the life of Jesus and his mission, especially the last week of his life in Jerusalem. These churches remain active and provide daily religious services to clergy, pilgrims, and local community members, like in any other place in the world. In Jerusalem, however, local Christians’ special religious services and celebrations enjoy a unique quality, especially during the Easter Holy Week, Palm Sunday, Christmas, the Feast of the Virgin Mary, as well as many other religious events. The biggest of these festival celebrations and processions draw attention to Jerusalem from all over the world. Without indigenous Christians participating, Jerusalem would lose an enormous and authentically historical part of its uniqueness as the most important city in Christianity.

The number of Christians, and especially indigenous Christians, who customarily participate in religious celebrations in Jerusalem long made it impossible to imagine a future where this would not continue to be the case. COVID-19 caused many religious ceremonies and celebrations to be marked without the usual local Christian presence, however. The pandemic period has provided a telling glimpse into what Jerusalem may look like in a future without an indigenous Christian population presence in the city.



Lack of Employment and services provided to the church and related church institutions: Approximately 35.5% percent of Christian youth in Jerusalem work in churches and church related organisations in Jerusalem.⁸ Their work consists of providing services that is consistent with the Christian faith to church-managed institutions that keep these churches and institutions running. Without the availability of indigenous local Christian “living stones” to provide these services, the character of the institutions may change, and these institutions may fall into disrepair and suffer from mismanagement, which would further damage the presence of Christianity in the city.

Lack of properly managed maintenance for church owned properties: The churches in Jerusalem, with their different denominations, own, control and manage approximately 134 churches, monasteries and shrines, more than one thousand residential units, as well as several hundred commercial shops that are leased to the indigenous Christian community of Jerusalem.⁹ Having no indigenous Christians in Jerusalem living and working in these church owned properties may provide the opportunity for other parties to take these properties over, whether by force or opportunistically, by virtue of their owners’ and custodians’ absence, and churches may be forced to give away, sell or otherwise cede these properties. Such a decline in the size and upkeep of Christian owned real estate in Jerusalem would further reduce Christian influence and power within the city and leave indigenous local Christians vulnerable to further losses, including in the economic, social and political realms.

Advocacy through Christian pilgrimage: Christian guides and travel agencies play a major role in advocacy and awareness raising about the Palestinian cause, including by raising awareness about problems that Palestinians face due to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the effects of Is-

⁸ Akroush, G., (2019) “To integrate or to Emigrate”, A Community-Based study of the needs, Challenges, Aspirations, and the way forwards for the Christian youth in Jerusalem. P. 19.

⁹ PalVision (2021), “Academic Research on Christian Cultural Heritage in Jerusalem”. Pp. 25-28.



raeli attempts to demolish Palestinian cultural heritage in the City of Jerusalem and concerns about diminishing Christian presence in Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Tour guides play a major role in informing pilgrims that come to the Holy Land from all over the world, not just about the gospel message and places connected to Jesus' life in Jerusalem, but also about ecumenism, interfaith relationships, history and resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as intensifying Israeli attempts to render Jerusalem as monolithically Jewish and Zionist as possible. Having no pilgrim guides from the Christian community would negatively impact advocacy and awareness raising that historically has supported and educated outsiders about the Palestinian right to exist, and thrive, in their land and place of origin.

Contribution of indigenous Christians to the Palestinian cause and aspirations for freedom and justice: Indigenous Christians have made significant contributions to Palestinian society in the spheres of politics, the arts, science, social welfare, innovation and commerce. Moreover, from the 1980s onwards, the Palestinian context of struggle also has been a primary source for the emergence of a socially and politically committed contextual theology. These contributions have been made through numerous Christian civic organisations and institutions that sustain the Palestinian cause. Having no more such institutions would negatively impact legitimate Palestinian aspirations to attain freedom and justice.



Conclusion and recommendation

This factsheet grapples with a hard and decidedly uncomfortable truth – that the indigenous Christian population of Jerusalem is declining and may disappear altogether within the next fifty years. The research undertaken under this project profiled multiple segments of the Christian community and found divergent views amongst the local indigenous population, the “living stones,” as well as the churches and religious institutions that tirelessly work to preserve the physical presence of Christianity in the city.

This factsheet aims to present these views alongside supporting statistical data to warn that the future of Christianity in Jerusalem faces a grave threat. It is not too late for the current negative trend to be slowed, and even reversed, but this first requires a broad and common acceptance of the problem and subsequent agreement on what collective action should be taken to rectify the key issues that prevent indigenous Christians from staying, and prospering, in Jerusalem.

We hope that this factsheet can positively contribute to influencing church decision makers to seriously consider the risk that one day in the not-so-distant future there may be no more “living stones” residing in the Holy Land, and to intensify collective efforts to keep Christianity not only alive, but thriving, in Jerusalem, the most Holy Place for Christians all over the world.





