

Learning from the Middle East churches: Perseverance and courage

by [Gary M. Burge](#) in the [May 16, 2001](#) issue

My encounters with Arab Christians in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Palestine have changed the way I look at both the New Testament and the mission of the church. My richest experiences have been in Palestine, because my career has brought me back to the Holy Land again and again. Each time I entered this world, I made new friends among Palestinian Christians, who have shaped me in many ways. As I think about what I've learned from these Christian communities, from Gaza to Galilee, from Beit Jala to Bir Zeit, four things come to mind.

- **This is a church that suffers.** Recently a pastor in Galilee described the Palestinian church as a “church under the cross.” He meant that this church has experienced dislocation and persecution for so many centuries that these things have now become a part of its life and identity. William Dalrymple’s *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East* bears eloquent testimony to the harsh realities of Middle Eastern history and the struggle of Christians there to hold on. The great flourishing communities of Turkey and Syria are evidenced only by the ruins of their great monasteries and churches, and only remnants of these communities remain. And today in Palestine the struggle for justice and the unending tension of conflict drive more and more Christians out of the country. Father Majdi al-Siryani of Beit Sahour told me this past summer, “We understand suffering, but don’t feel sorry for us. We are hibernating.”

Perhaps that’s it. Since the seventh century and the advent of Islam, this church has understood what it means to survive when political and religious currents struggle for dominion. It has learned how to hibernate when the dangers and challenges of life in the world seemed overwhelming. When I visited the Mar Saba Monastery in the desert east of Jerusalem I marveled at its fortifications. A password was required even to get through the front gate, and a bell alerted the community to the arrival of outsiders. Strong high walls enclose the monastery. The monks tell the story of long-ago attacks as if they had occurred yesterday.

Eighty percent of the residents of Beit Jala are Christian, according to Abuna Maroun Lahham of its Latin Seminary. Today this Christian community endures the shelling of Israeli tanks and the missiles of Apache attack helicopters. If Christians protest against the young Palestinian snipers who fire their rifles at the Israeli settlement of Gilo—fire that is answered by shelling that reduces Palestinian homes to rubble—will they be perceived as unfaithful to the resistance against the Israeli occupation? What discernment it takes to be a Christian in Beit Jala today! Lahham reminded me that in the past 2,000 years the church in Palestine has been free for less than 300. Christians have learned “to absorb suffering.”

Words like perseverance and courage and faithfulness come to mind. I think of Jesus’ words to the church of Smyrna in Revelation 2:9-11: “I know your tribulation and your poverty—but you are rich; and I know the slander of those who say that they are people of God and are not. . . . Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

But this is not a church that lives in fear. It has offered a continuous witness to its faith even in times of greatest danger. Attalah Hannah, leader of the Arab Orthodox in Palestine, told me, “Don’t think of the church of Jerusalem as if it were in ruins. We are alive! We simply need a little help.”

I am stunned at how rarely I hear my Arab Christian friends complain about their circumstances. Even as they live with the terror and devastation brought by the nightly shellings of Bethlehem, Beit Sahur and Beit Jala, people try to carry on with their lives and even make a joke about the shelling, calling it the evening symphony or concerto. Father Emile of Bir Zeit once reminded me that in America a crisis is a 50-cent-per-gallon increase in the price of gas. Not so in the Middle East.

• **This church draws strength from tradition.** The Middle Eastern church knows its history and draws strength not only from its old stories but from the mandate that this history provides. Mitri Rahib of Bethlehem’s Lutheran Church, for example, states that his commitment to the Palestinian church is a gesture of faithfulness to his family’s long Christian heritage. The students I bring to Israel and Palestine know little of the history of the Christian church prior to the Reformation. Even if they know something of the earliest ecumenical councils, they do not have a deep appreciation for the value of those centuries. For many, Christian history jumps from

Paul to Augustine, then to the Crusades and from there to Luther. The leap from St. Paul to St. Billy Graham is a short one. Many know more about Colorado Springs than they do about Chalcedon.

I want my students to get some sense of the great history of Christianity in this land, to realize that, for instance, from the second to the seventh century some of the greatest minds in the most formative period of the church lived between Antioch and Alexandria. Even after the coming of Islam, this church survived despite its marginalization and the massive conversions to the new faith. I want my students to inherit the richness of spiritual expressions birthed from a cultural world very different from theirs, and to discover in them meanings lost to most Protestants.

Members of these ancient churches cling to sacred traditions and sacred histories that have nourished them for centuries. In Nazareth, Najeeb Rizik, a pharmacist and the president of Nazareth's Orthodox church, worries because 12 years of living in Texas have made his teenage daughters prefer Nazareth's Baptist church. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but he fears that the deep roots of a millennium-old family heritage are being lost.

Having learned to respect the "ancient churches," I find myself increasingly discouraged by Christians in the West who discredit or disrespect Antiochene or Coptic or Melkite Christian traditions. A bishop from one of these ancient churches would not be allowed to speak at my college chapel. But how much we could learn from these churches whose traditions—from their creeds to their hymnody—have enabled them to persevere for 1,500 years.

• **This church illustrates the power of the priesthood.** In 1986 when the young Father Majdi joined the parish in Bir Zeit, he found that his church council was filled with Palestinian intellectuals committed to numerous resistance organizations (such as the PFLP and Fateh). Most had been imprisoned, many had been tortured. The church's mission had been shaped by the uprising called the *intifada*. Once when there was a strike, soldiers entered the parish grounds of the church and arrested Majdi. A young Israeli struck him with the butt of his rifle, the first time in his life Majdi had ever been hit. Instinctively, he took out his passport and slapped the soldier across the face with it. When two more soldiers approached no one knew what to do next. Majdi told them, "Kill me if this is what you are here for." But because he was a priest, they backed away and left him alone.

This episode was a turning point for Majdi in his ministry. Through it he learned that his position as a priest, as a visible spiritual leader, empowers him to challenge oppression as no one else can. He now serves a parish in Beit Sahour and more than once has intervened at the Bethlehem checkpoint, using his “clerical collar” as leverage against evil.

This past summer I interviewed a number of Catholic and Orthodox priests in Palestine; all were devout men who interpreted their ministry as a calling to actively resist evil. Each of them knows he walks a fine line. “The altar was not made for politics,” Majdi says. But it seems that the cassock and the cross can become an amazing uniform which still has the power to give its wearer a protected voice.

This community has made me rethink the “care of souls.” What is the shape of ministry when the wolf is near your flock? My evangelical heritage has consistently disengaged me from social or political involvement—just as many Palestinian evangelicals struggle with disengagement today. But pastors in Nazareth, Bir Zeit, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Beit Jalla hear a different call.

- **This church places a high priority on compassion and caregiving.** Christian leadership in a land of crisis means living with the struggles of your people and defending them, no matter where it leads. In his book *I Am a Palestinian Christian* Mitri Rahib tells the story of a church family whose vineyard was under the threat of confiscation by the Israelis because they claimed it was “uncultivated.” The family had purchased the land 100 years earlier, and their vineyard had been richly productive. But the Israelis had restricted water distribution in Bethlehem, and without water the vineyard had ceased to be productive. The real reason for the confiscation was simple: the vineyard occupied a lovely hilltop surrounded by three Israeli settlements. The Israelis wanted to consolidate Jewish control over this area.

The church decided to help the family fight the confiscation order. Committees were set up to prevent the loss of land. One group, headed by an attorney, worked on a legal appeal. Others obtained tractors to replot the land and plants to renew the fields. Another worked on media relations. When word got out, Christians and Muslims, Americans and Europeans came to the vineyard to plant trees.

In 1999 I had the privilege of standing with the young men of this family on the highest point of their land. The cave where their grandfather lived while he tilled the land for the first time stood behind us. But looming to the west was an incredible sight. A settlement, pristine, modern and growing rapidly—a new suburb for

Jerusalem—hovered on the edge of the family’s land. Bulldozers were scraping away at the perimeter of the farm, defiantly eroding its boundary. These are the “cutting edge” issues of Rahib’s pastorate.