

# Baptists in ISRAEL

## To mark 100 YEARS of Baptist Witness in 2011

By Bader Mansour

Farewells were said as a determined young man left his family in Safed, the crown jewel of the mountains overlooking the Sea of Galilee, to make his way to America. In 1909, under the love and guidance of Dr. George W. Truett, Shukri Musa found the desire of his heart and was baptized into the fellowship of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas.

In the spring of 1911, the Baptist Churches of Southern Illinois sent Mr. Musa, now an ordained pastor, back to his people in Safed. Many hearts were stirred by the soundness and power of his witnessing. One young man, Louis Hanna, became convinced of the truth of the Baptist faith and interpretation of the New Testament and requested baptism. Thus the first Baptist member in Palestine was baptized May 10, 1911 in the stream that flows through Wadi el Lemun (Valley of the Lemon), near Safed.

(From "Southern Baptist Golden Anniversary, Palestine-Israel," 1911-1961, Dwight Baker)

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is referred to many times as a conflict that is "100 years old." It is in this background that Baptists in Israel are preparing to celebrate 100 years since Baptist work began in Israel/Palestine in 1911 and developed into a thriving church in Nazareth. The Nazareth Baptist Church was founded in 1926 and still stands today and is referred to as "the Mother Church"



within the Association of Baptist Churches in Israel (ABCI). The 1948 war scattered many of the Palestinian Baptist believers who became refugees in neighboring countries. Baptist work had a new beginning following the war and one of the landmarks was the establishment of Nazareth Baptist School in 1949. This KG-12 school – from kindergarten to grade 12 – is considered today to be one of the best schools in the country with its graduates influencing the community in different ways.

The Baptist community in Israel numbers 3,000 people making up 20 churches in Galilee and Central Israel. Of these churches, 16 are native Arabic speaking churches in places like Nazareth, Haifa, Cana of Galilee, Shafamer, Kufur Yaseef, Toraan, Ramle, Acre, Rama and Eilaboun. They are organized together under the ABCI. The current chairman of ABCI is Monther Naoum, who is an ordained elder at Shafamer Baptist



*Above:* Bader Mansour, Secretary of the Association of Baptist Churches in Israel

*Left:* Ordination of a Baptist pastor in Nazareth in 2008

Church. He is also chairman of the Evangelical Convention in Israel that brings together all evangelical churches and para-church institutions in the country. The Association is going through some major organizational changes to meet the challenges of the era now that the missionaries have left and a new generation is emerging. Recently, a draft constitution was proposed to replace an old constitution from the 1960s.

The Baptist community in Israel is trying to make an impact. Living in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society can be tough. It isn't easy being a minority group. Arab-Israeli citizens are considered second class citizens who receive less state benefits than Jewish-Israelis. "Between a rock and a hard place" describes it well.

Even though the churches are growing in number, they have a great need for development. Lots of the pastors are untrained and some have to work more than one job in order to survive. Many churches do not own a church building and meet in rented apartments, which limits their activities. Even the crown of the Baptist witness in Israel, Nazareth Baptist School, is located in an outdated building in central Nazareth with hopes to move to a new, modern campus.

With all these difficulties, the small Baptist community in the land where God became flesh and dwelt among us is experiencing revival and growth. The dynamic outreach ministry led by Ashraf Abishai has greatly blessed the surrounding communities in Galilee, and involves many volunteers from ABCI churches. Many families have opened their homes to begin Bible studies and hear the Word of God in different towns. The ministry has fruits where people are coming to accept Christ as their personal savior. Recently, 35 new believers were baptized in the Jordan River on one occasion and many more are coming forward. Some young people are making decisions to study for the ministry.



*Above:* Participants in the First Century Nazareth Village. Baptists, together with other Christians have established a living presentation of the life, times, and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth for the world.

*Bottom:* Monther Naoum, Chairman of the Association of Baptist Churches in Israel

A major step toward realizing and meeting the need for training local leaders was the opening of the Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary (NETS) in 2007, which is a Baptist initiative with other evangelicals invited to participate. There are around 30 students in the seminary today, many who are active leaders in their churches already. They study in the beautiful "Nazareth Baptist Missionary House" that was purchased recently and is in walking distance from the town's major historical sites.

Baptists are peacemakers and work for social justice in the Holy Land. From one side, they are united with fellow Christians in the Palestinian Territories who are under lots of pressure. At the same time, they have fellowship with Messianic Jews in Israel, another persecuted group that tries to witness to the peoples of this land. This unity of the followers of Christ has been a counterbalance to fanatics from all sides, including Christians who favor one side or another in the conflict. Baptists in the Holy Land are raising the banner of love and forgiveness, walking in the footsteps of Jesus, ministering in some of the same locations where Jesus himself ministered 2,000 years ago, trying against all odds to be salt and light in the land with 100 years of conflict that does not look like it is coming to an end soon.

Please visit the Association of Baptist Churches website, [www.baptist.org.il](http://www.baptist.org.il).

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