

Iraqi Christians living in fear, say Baptists

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue

As bombings increased recently in Baghdad, a Baptist pastor in the Iraqi capital told a European Baptist leader that Christians there are living in fear, especially after an attack October 31 at a Catholic church left nearly 60 dead.

Security forces stormed Our Lady of Salvation Chaldean Catholic Church, where more than 100 worshipers who had gathered for evening mass were being held hostage by gunmen demanding the release of al-Qaeda prisoners in Iraq and Egypt.

While there have been numerous attacks on Iraqi Christians since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, the October 31 incident was by far the bloodiest and will likely expedite the ongoing exodus of Christians of various denominations in Iraq. The nation's Christian community has dwindled from about 1 million to 600,000 or fewer since the war began.

Tony Peck, general secretary of the European Baptist Federation, said the pastor of the Baptist Church in Baghdad informed him that the "Christian community is now very fearful for its safety."

"Some of the Baptist believers are talking about moving away from Baghdad to North Iraq, others to Jordan and Syria," Peck quoted the Iraqi pastor as saying. Peck called that a "very understandable response" that "would leave the Christian church in Iraq even weaker than before."

Some sources suggested that part of the attackers' motivation grew from reports that a U.S. pastor threatened to burn copies of the Qur'an in September. Though the pastor called off those plans, Peck said the incident points to the need for Christians in the West to "be wise and considerate in the way they engage critically with Islam."

Baptists in Baghdad are also considering changing their day of worship from Sunday to Friday, the traditional day of worship for Muslims. The practice has already been

adopted by Christians in several Muslim-majority countries.

Raimundo Barreto, director of freedom and justice for the Baptist World Alliance, based in Falls Church, Virginia, expressed regret for "the unjustifiable murder" of Catholic Christians and affirmed "profound solidarity" with Christians in Iraq.

"As followers of Jesus Christ we advocate for true and lasting peace in that region," Barreto said. "We call on Christians all over the world to work diligently to prevent any escalation of violence, by not repaying evil with evil, but by overcoming evil with good." —ABP