

U.S. Jewish groups donate to help church in Israel recover after arson

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue

Two American Jewish organizations are among those helping an Israeli church recover from an arson attack.

The Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee have each donated funds to the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes in Tabgha, the site near the Sea of Galilee where, according to Christian tradition, Jesus miraculously multiplied loaves and fish to feed 5,000 people.

Church officials said these and other donations will help defray fire-related costs, such as vital lost income from the church's destroyed gift shop, but not the actual cost of the repairs.

"Whatever repairs are not covered by insurance must be paid for by the Israeli government," said Wadie Abunassar, media spokesman for the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land. "We believe this attack was tantamount to a terror attack, and when there is a terror attack the state is responsible for paying for compensation and prosecutes the perpetrators."

The attack took place the night of June 17. Two people were injured during the fire, which severely damaged parts of the Catholic church as well as an adjoining monastery. Graffiti declaring in Hebrew "False idols will be smashed" was scrawled on one of the walls.

According to the Israel Security Agency, as of late July police had arrested five people and filed indictments against two, describing them as being from a group of extremist Jewish youth activists. The group's leader recently wrote on his blog, "Only those who deny idolatry and fight against Christianity and aspire to remove the churches from the Holy Land . . . are called Jews."

The attack was one of dozens of acts of vandalism against Christian and Muslim holy sites since 2009, according to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. This was the second attack against the Multiplication Church in the past year and a half.

The police believe that so-called “price tag” attacks are being committed by far-right-wing Jewish nationalists bent on exacting a “price” from the Israeli government for not doing more to build and expand Jewish settlements in the West Bank on land Israel captured during the 1967 Middle East war.

Shocking though the arson was for Israel’s Christian minority, which comprises less than 2 percent of the population, “out of this tragedy we experienced an outpouring of solidarity and respect from all parts of the Israeli community,” said Matthias Karl, a German monk and priest, and one of the church’s leaders.

During a June 21 solidarity rally outside the church attended by thousands of people, Giacinto-Boulos Marcuzzo, the Latin patriarchal vicar, noted that there has been a groundswell of support from many ordinary Israelis.

“This time the impact was felt by all inhabitants, especially on the popular level,” Marcuzzo said. “Walking along the streets of Haifa, or waiting for green light at road junctions, Muslims or Jews would tell us: ‘Father, we regret what happened in Tabgha; you have our full solidarity.’”

Karl guided Abraham Foxman, ADL’s national director, through the damaged church on June 30. He told Foxman, “The Israeli government must act in a way so that future desecrators will have to face serious consequences.”

Foxman told him that representatives of his organization met with police and security officials as well as representatives of the Israeli government soon after the attack, “urging them to do everything in their power to bring the perpetrators to justice. This is the only way to prevent future desecrations.”

Karl said Foxman then gave the church a “very impressive” donation and that other groups from various religions are assisting as well.

“Our souvenir shop was destroyed, and it was the only place we made an income,” Karl said. “We need to pay our workers, our electricity and gas. We run a program for handicapped Palestinians and Israelis and ask for only a symbolic donation, even though our costs are high.”

Abunassar warned that attacks like these will continue until Israel’s security forces arrest and convict those responsible, and until Israeli society focuses on “reeducation.”

Unless young people are educated to respect other faiths, he said, “nothing will change.” —Religion News Service

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