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Coronavirus outbreak results in quarantine of Alabama pastor, members in Israel

by Diana Chandler, posted Friday, March 06, 2020 (one month ago)

BETHLEHEM, Israel (BP) -- A Southern Baptist pastor on lockdown in a Bethlehem area hotel while awaiting results of testing for the coronavirus (COVID-19) said he and his 12 congregants are confident God will use the experience for His glory.

Pastor Chris Bell and 12 members of 3Circle Church based in Fairhope, Ala., were tested with nose swabs for COVID-19 Friday (March 6) and expect results within a day, he told Baptist Press. They have been quarantined since Thursday at the Angel Hotel in Beit Jala after a hotel resident tested positive for the virus.

"It is impossible for me to believe that God does not have a plan for this," Bell told BP, "because how in the world could we end up in the hotel where the epicenter of this thing takes place?"

"And we are convinced -- we don't like it, we don't want it -- but we're convinced God's going to use this. We're convinced that He knows exactly where we are, and He has not forgotten us. And we believe that deeply."

When Bell, church leaders and their wives traveled to Israel for a tour of the Holy Land, they were assured Israel was one of the safest places to travel while avoiding the coronavirus outbreak, he said. What were only three cases in Israel when the group left the U.S., he said, have since grown to at least 21, Israel's health ministry announced Friday.

Despite faith, Bell and his members are still suffering.

"But of course we're human," he said, "and we're worried and concerned and tired and exhausted and all of those things. Our emotions are running the gamut for sure."

Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee President Ronnie Floyd contacted White House and U.S. State Department officials Friday to ensure they are aware of Bell's situation, Floyd told BP.

Bell pastors the multisite 3Circle Church in Alabama, with campuses in Fairhope, Mobile and Daphne. The travelers have no indication of what the Israeli government's procedure will be when tests results are received, but are eager to return home.

"One thing we want real bad," he said, "is to be brought back to the U.S. And then they can quarantine us there if they need to."

Bell asked the Southern Baptist family for prayer and help.

"If anyone knows of anyone they can call to see if they can get help as far as getting us home, that'd be great," Bell said. "Other than that ... pray that God would certainly help us, but even more importantly that God would use us. That while He's got a spotlight on us a little while, that we'd be faithful to live out our faith and trust in Him."

A U.S. Embassy official told NBC News the embassy is "aware of reports and ... providing assistance."

Globally, coronavirus had killed nearly 3,400 and infected more than 100,000, the World Health Organization said Friday. The virus is blamed for 14 deaths and more than 230 infections in the U.S.

SBC entities have issued statements and guidelines for their gospel workers, employees and staff. The International Mission Board has formed a coronavirus task force to specifically address the implications for its personnel and partners, including church volunteer mission teams. Floyd has invited representatives from the SBC's national entities to participate in a Monday (March 9) conference call to discuss best practices and prevention strategies, and to pray for churches, communities and the U.S.

Symptoms of the respiratory illness include a cough, fever and shortness of breath. Those experiencing symptoms are advised to call their physicians for instructions and to self-quarantine for 14 days, according to health officials.



Pastor Chris Bell and 12 members of his congregation, 3Circle Church based in Fairhope, Ala., are on lockdown in a hotel near Bethlehem, Israel, awaiting their results of COVID-19 tests after a hotel guest tested positive.

Photo by Chris Bell

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Officers patrol the perimeters of Angel Hotel in Beit Jala near Bethlehem Israel. The hotel is on lockdown after a guest tested positive for COVID-19.
Photo from Chris Bell