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COVID-19 test results negative for Alabama pastor, members held in Israel

by Diana Chandler, posted Monday, March 09, 2020 (one month ago)

BETHLEHEM, Israel (BP) -- Test results for the new coronavirus (COVID-19) are negative for pastor Chris Bell and 12 members of his church on lockdown at a Bethlehem area hotel, he told Baptist Press Monday (March 9).

But Bell was not certain Monday morning when he and other members of 3Circle Church based in Fairhope, Ala., would be able to return home.

"We tested completely clear for the virus. We've been medically cleared," he told BP. "We are hopeful to be released because of that."

In a post on the 3Circle Church Facebook page, Bell said, "Our team is very hopeful to be released soon, however details and timelines are not confirmed. Please continue to pray!"

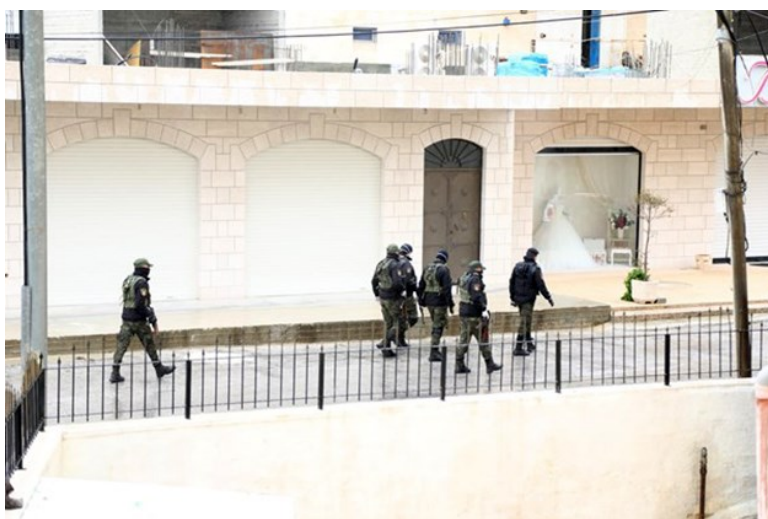
The 13 had been quarantined since March 5 in their rooms at the Angel Hotel in Beit Jala after a hotel resident tested positive for COVID-19, which stands for coronavirus disease 2019.

Bell, church staff members and wives arrived in Bethlehem the night of March 2 for a tour of the Holy Land, just days before their ordeal began. Bell has said he believes God will use the experience for good.

"It is impossible for me to believe that God does not have a plan for this," Bell told BP March 6, "because how in the world could we end up in the hotel where the epicenter of this thing takes place?"



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



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 by Chris Bell

"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."

Shortly after Bell and others were quarantined, Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee President Ronnie Floyd contacted the White House and U.S. State Department officials to ensure they were aware of the church's situation, and a U.S. Embassy official told NBC News the embassy was assisting authorities in securing Bell's release.

Globally, coronavirus had killed nearly 4,000 and infected more than 113,000, according to tracking sites. The virus is blamed for 22 deaths and more than 500 infections in the U.S., the New York Times reported Monday.

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 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.

There is no vaccine to prevent infection, but avoidance measures include frequently washing hands for at least 20 seconds, avoiding close contact with people who are sick; not using hands to touch one's eyes, nose and mouth; covering coughs or sneezes with tissue and then throwing the tissue away in the trash; and cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press' general assignment writer/editor. BP reports on missions, ministry and witness advanced through the Cooperative Program and on news related to Southern Baptists'... [Expand Bio]

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