

A Miracle in Babylon

There is some good news coming out of Iraq. Christian churches are growing at an unprecedented rate.

Beneath the rubble of news about bombings, hostage-taking and political wrangling in Iraq lies a more positive picture of young evangelical churches.

In the northeast, Iraqi Kurdistan offers a haven for Christian activity as the two rival Kurdish governments grow in their toleration of Muslims becoming Christians. In the south, the evangelical church is growing rapidly.

In Baghdad, a total of 15 evangelical congregations have started since the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003. Officially, only two evangelical churches-both Presbyterian and led by Egyptian nationals-existed in the capital during Hussein's rule. Now there are Baptists, Methodists, and Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) congregations, all led by local Iraqi pastors.

"The people are open like never before," says Ghassan Thomas, pastor of a CMA church in Baghdad. "It is because we have no peace. This is how we connect our message to the nation: I preach on the topic, 'How do we get peace?' and everyone listens, especially when I talk about the deeper peace that Christ brings."

Most of the members of the new churches come from the Presbyterian Church, and some come from historic Christian denominations such as the Chaldean Catholic or Syrian Orthodox, which have been in Iraq for centuries.

"Muslims, too, want peace," Thomas says. "Many of them are

frightened. When the hostages are killed, often a Quranic verse is used to justify it. So many Muslims are scared of their own god. When we preach that God is love, it is so liberating to them.”

Southern Iraq is deemed too dangerous for foreign Christian workers. Most have pulled back to the more stable Iraqi Kurdistan. More than 4 million Kurds reside in this northern mountainous region, which has enjoyed autonomy since the first Gulf War in 1991.

Two Kurdish political factions control the area. Arbil is the main city of the domain of Massoud Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party, and Sulemaniya is the power center of newly elected Iraqi President Jalal Talabani.

In both regions Kurdish refugees are flooding back. There is little street crime, and authorities have severely curtailed the activities of Islamic extremists. This has brought much prosperity to the area, which many believe is one reason the respective administrations-in their courting of Western investment-have markedly improved their defense of religious freedom.

“The last 10 years have been a golden time here, and it is set to continue with Talabani becoming president,” says Yousif Matty, a leading pastor of the Kurdish Evangelical Church, a denomination in the north comprising Kurdish and Arabic Christians. “He has been very strong on emphasizing the rule of law. Also, the Kurds have suffered at the hands of Islamists and have no love for them.”

Matty’s churches have a few hundred members, from both Muslim

and Christian backgrounds. He runs four bookshops, two schools and other projects, and he received a \$500,000 plot of land from the government to build his church. The government has also welcomed other Christian nongovernmental organizations. The other evangelical denomination in the north is the Kurdish Language Evangelical Church, which is exclusively Kurdish-speaking and made up primarily of Kurds.

“There is always persecution from the family when a Muslim becomes a Christian,” says the Kurdish pastor of one fellowship in Arbil. “That will not change any time soon, but it used to be that the new convert would face persecution from the state also, yet this is less true today.”

Resisting Islam

The influence of the Kurds, who represent 25 percent of the Iraqi population, is important to the future of the country. President Talabani has less power than the Shiite prime minister, but some Christian leaders believe the best bulwark against a strongly Islamic Constitution may be the influence of the Kurds.

Though Sunni Muslims, the Kurdish people are one of the least observant groups in the Middle East. They were expected to oppose the Arabs, whom they believe have humiliated them for decades. Last summer, Nestorian Bishop Issac of Dohuk correctly predicted the Kurds would keep the constitution from becoming too Islamic.

“‘Shariah’ is really Arabic, and the Kurds will resist all attempts to Arabize the culture of Iraq,” Issac says. “If we go the Shariah route, it will be like in Iran where our

[Nestorian] church is less than 10 percent of the strength it was before [Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini took power.”

Another point of light for the Iraqi church is that many of the 40,000 or so Christians who fled after a spate of bombings in August 2004 have returned to the country. Yet the numbers of those still in refugee camps in Jordan and Syria remain significant-perhaps 10,000, though precise figures are not available.

“It’s not the end of the world that so many Christians have fled, because it has spread the Iraqi church over the world,” Issac says, “and the new communities established in America and Australia are providing many resources we would not have received if we had all remained in the land.”

The news is not all positive, of course. Iraq remains a country in crisis. At a recent conference for 70 Iraqi pastors, all had to travel early in the morning to avoid trouble on the roads. And although they stressed that the streets gradually have become safer since the beginning of the year, church meetings throughout the south are held at 4:30 in the afternoon-with everyone at home behind locked doors by 7:30 p.m. for fear of insurgent and looting activity.

Law and order still has not been adequately restored, nor have basic services. Patience has run out with U.S. and British forces’ failure to restore stability after two years in the country.

“No population will support an army that cannot protect it,” one pastor says. “The goodwill has completely gone.”

Middle-class Christians are also continuing to emigrate in alarming numbers, as those in key professions such as medicine are targets of kidnapping and extortion. This exodus has decimated some newer evangelical churches.

Strife From Within

The Iraqi churches also face internal challenges. Some priests from the historic churches have bullied the new evangelicals. In Baghdad, a priest from the Chaldean Catholics told those who had left his church to attend Baptist services: "We will not bury your relatives who attend our churches." Some leaders of the older church denominations have slandered evangelical congregations as "part of a Jewish conspiracy to control Iraq."

Also, though the evangelicals are skilled in evangelism, the church is young and immature. "Our outreach activity is so much stronger than the discipling function of the church," Matty warns. "We have radio outreach, schools, bookshops, but the church itself is not concentrating in deepening its life, nor are the leaders getting trained enough."

Some church leaders see the splitting of the evangelical churches into so many new-and often foreign-backed-denominations as an indication of disunity. And not all missionary aid is well-spent. Some pastors have used foreign support to buy expensive cars and upgrade their lifestyles, leading to envy among other pastors.

Yet for all these challenges, the mood among 70 evangelical pastors meeting in April was guardedly optimistic. A pastor of one of the three Baptist congregations in Baghdad, who did not

wish to be named, forecast three trends.

“One, the evangelical church will grow stronger, but many of its numbers will leave,” the pastor says. “However that’s not so bad. They will probably come back with more teaching and maturity, and it will benefit the church in the long term.

“Two, the historic churches will get even more negative. I see them as the major persecutor of the evangelicals in the future. It is as it always was.

“I am translating a book called The Trial of Blood, which calculates that the institutional churches killed 50 million Christians from 315 to 1570.

“Three, the Islamic extremists will moderate, though it may take a generation.”

Yet even when conflicts are at their sharpest, there are hopeful signs. Pastor Thomas from the CMA church in Baghdad tells of an incident that occurred when he received death threats written on cardboard after erecting a sign outside his church that said, “Jesus is the Light of the World.”

On the cardboard was scrawled: “Jesus is not the light of the world. Allah is, and you have been warned.” It was signed, “the Islamic Shiite Party.”

Thomas loaded up a van full of children’s gifts from a Christian relief agency, together with some Bibles and medicines, and drove to the headquarters of the Islamic Shiite Party. When he came to the compound, he demanded to “see the

big sheikh, I have gifts for him.”

He was taken to meet the leader, and he introduced himself as a pastor.

“We respect you,” the sheikh said.

Thomas said, “Christians have love for you, because God is love, our God is a God of love.”

Again the sheikh replied: “We respect your God. We respect Jesus.”

This was the opening Thomas had been praying for. He said, “If you respect Jesus, would you let me read you His words?” He took out his Bible and read the words of Jesus from John 8, “I am the light of the world.” Then he brought out the cardboard with the death threat.

The sheikh read it and looked ashamed. After a brief pause, he said: “We are sorry. This will not happen again. You are my brother. If anyone comes to kill you, it will be my neck first.” The sheikh even attended Thomas’ ordination as the pastor.

“No one is expecting the situation to improve for the better quickly,” Thomas says, “but we believe that God is moving in these times and that the future will be more peaceful, especially if Christians will befriend good Muslims and work together.” ?

The Church of the Forgotten

Christians have worshiped in Iraq for hundreds of years, but their suffering has been overlooked by the world.

Though reports of church growth in Iraq have begun to surface only recently, Christians have been living in the region for centuries. Centered in northern Iraq, in the land once known as Nineveh, the Assyrian Church is one of the oldest Christian communities in the history of the faith. No stranger to difficulty and persecution-most recently during the pernicious rule of Saddam Hussein-the Assyrian Church is once again in dire straits.

Although the Assyrians and other minorities in northern Iraq praised the capture of Hussein by U.S. and allied forces, those groups have been leaving the country in droves. According to a recent statement issued by the Religious Freedom Coalition, in the last year more than 60,000 Assyrians and other minorities have fled Iraq. Those who remained are being subjected to increasing pressure and persecution.

A chief source of frustration is the inequitable distribution of reconstruction funds and resources. Michael Youash, executive director of the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, says these funds are being distributed through Kurdish authorities to the detriment of Assyrians and other non-Muslim minorities. He says even basic infrastructures such as electricity and water are being selectively disbursed based on religious and political grounds, leaving non-Muslim areas virtually uninhabitable.

The Assyrians and other minorities also feel disenchanted with

the new regime. The Assyrian International News Agency, , is reporting that voter fraud and irregularities in the most recent elections resulted in the massive disenfranchisement of the Christian electorate.

Perhaps the most critical issue currently facing the Assyrian Church and non-Muslim minorities, however, is the looming specter of an Islamic Republic of Iraq. This fall, a critical vote was to be taken on Iraq's new constitution. At press time, controversy surrounded Article 7, which read, "Islam is the official religion of the State."

Under Hussein's regime the country remained largely secular. Observers feared the push for Islamic rule was being fueled by outside extremists who received monetary support from international sources dedicated to the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. In July, grave reports already were surfacing of Christian persecution at the hands of Islamic extremists, including intimidation, kidnapping, church burnings and murder.

Internally, the push to institute Islam is coming from the new leadership, many of whom returned to Iraq after the liberation and are characterized as out of touch with Iraqi people. Iraq's new prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaffari has been quoted as saying, "If we do not put Islam as the religion of the state, the people would revolt!" This despite evidence that the Iraqi people themselves desire a secular state.

There is some hope that the new constitution will grant the Assyrians some level of autonomous governance. Yet many are concerned that a premature withdrawal by American forces might leave them in the lurch.

“We are extremely grateful for what the Americans did,” says Ken Joseph Jr. of , “but 1,500-plus American heroes did not give their lives to create the Islamic Republic of Iraq.”

Meanwhile, Assyrian believers say they are facing a challenge from Christian organizations which, instead of empowering and equipping the indigenous church, are eroding its base by establishing new churches from existing congregations.

In the end, Joseph says, “One of the key indicators of a country’s health is its ability to protect and preserve its minorities.” In this respect, the plight of the Assyrian church and other non-Muslim minorities should be a sign of great concern.

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This article was prepared by Compass Direct, an international news service designed to raise awareness of persecuted Christians. Due to political tensions in Iraq, the author’s name was withheld to protect his identity.