

Iraqi Christians Call for Prayer, Not War

Frightened and persecuted believers say removal of Saddam Hussein will not secure their future

Iraq's Christians believe U.S. military intervention may only make their situation worse, anonymous sources have told Charisma. Frightened to speak out, and targeted by the authorities as well as the majority Muslim communities in which they live, Iraqi believers say they are caught between a rock and a hard place.

They feel as exposed and vulnerable as any other Iraqi to impending attacks by Western forces, which is a likely next-step action if weapons inspections fail to appease a determined Bush administration from either disarming or removing Saddam Hussein.

If Iraqi Christians criticize Hussein's government, they invite arrest, torture and death, yet by remaining silent the world judges them to be compliant with a repressive and unjust regime, they say. Sources in Iraq say there are many silent witnesses who would be happy to speak against Hussein's tyranny if they were living outside the country.

Whether Hussein remains in power or is replaced, Christians fear internal forces almost more than the threat of war. They cannot see anything but a bleak future for the church in this land that is so often mentioned in the Old Testament.

Nineveh was the biblical city God told the prophet Jonah to

visit and warn of impending judgment. According to the prophet's account, the people in those days repented. Today, ancient Ninevah's ruins lie next to the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. Christians there are praying that God will again visit the city.

"They are rebuilding Babylon, and we feel that evil spirits have long been in control over large areas of Iraq," one Christian leader told Charisma. "We are organizing special prayers—spiritual warfare—to come against the spirits and their strongholds—from Nebuchadnezzar to Saddam Hussein. We would be encouraged to know that other Christians around the world were praying for the same things."

Sources differ on exact figures, but most estimate there are more than 1 million Christians in Iraq, which is about 5 percent of the population. Not all of these Christians are active believers. In fact, the churches have been so infiltrated by Hussein's security forces that Christians dare not risk being seen doing evangelism or other Christian work.

"There are Christians who just go through the motions—they are Christians because of their background and culture," the leader said. "If you enter a traditional church you might find all the trappings of Christianity, but there is no real growth in these churches. Some Christians obviously love God but fear to talk about the gospel openly, in case spies will report them to the authorities."

This has forced the active evangelistic church and its work underground, especially in Muslim fundamentalist areas where churches have become house meetings that can be moved and changed at a moment's notice. Ironically, it is the very threat of persecution that brought about a return to the style

of meeting and worship that characterized the first believers.

The oldest church in Iraq is the Assyrian Church, the roots of which go back to the Assyrian nation, which adopted Christianity in A.D. 179. The language they speak is related to Aramaic, spoken in the time of Jesus.

The Chaldean Church, in union with the Vatican, numbers some 500,000 in Iraq. Its leader, Patriarch Raphael I. Bidawid, is well-respected throughout the country.

The Nestorian Assyrians follow the teachings of Bishop Nestorius, who did not accept the Virgin Mary as the "Mother of God." Their churches are bare of any trappings or images. A simple altar on which a plain cross stands is preferred.

Formerly persecuted by the Chaldeans, the Nestorians have today drawn closer to their Chaldean cousins and even share buildings and resources. Some estimates suggest there are more than 300,000 Nestorians still in Iraq. They claim to have sent the first missionaries to Mongolia, China and Japan.

There are also small groups of Anglicans, Lutherans and evangelicals, especially in Baghdad and other more populous areas.

Saddam Hussein is reported to have destroyed hundreds of Assyrian villages. Meanwhile, in the north, Kurdish extremists have destroyed 150 churches.

Christians are frightened to wear their traditional crosses. They are being called "crusaders" and are seen by Iraqi

Muslims as potential traitors and allies of the Western powers. "Go to the Americans to ask for food," they are told.

Many have emigrated. One estimate suggests that 150,000 Christians have left Iraq since the Persian Gulf War. The largest Chaldean community outside Iraq is in Detroit.

In Baghdad, there has been an influx of fundamentalist Muslims from radical areas. Once well-known for its open secularism, Baghdad is changing today. More women are seen wearing the hijab, or face covering, and they disappear from the streets before sundown.

Iraqi Christian leaders say if another government were to replace the current one, the Christian communities would have no hope of better representation.

If a Muslim wants to become a believer, few churches would baptize him or offer him teaching and assistance. His family would do everything possible to bring him back into the fold of Islam. His life may be threatened, and his goods, property, and wife and children could be taken away.

Yet Iraqi Christians do not believe war is the answer. There is a great deal of respect for the pope for his stance against military action against Iraq.

"War is the last thing we need," one Christian leader said. "But we don't want to be forgotten by the international community. Tell the churches in the West to pray for us."

David Freeman