

Prayer Effort Links Christians to Iraqis

The Internet-based initiative urges Christians to adopt an Iraqi city and pray for it daily

Evangelical leaders announced the launch of a global prayer initiative for Iraq and debunked criticism that post-war Christian relief efforts aimed to convert the mostly Muslim nation to Christianity.

Leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)—in partnership with the World Prayer Team, the Presidential Prayer Team, World Relief and the Christian Emergency Network—formally opened Operation Iraqi Care at a May 22 press conference in Washington, D.C. The Internet-based effort urges Christians to adopt an Iraqi city and pray for it daily.

“I am asking that the 47 million Christians in America who love to pray according to the Scriptures include in their prayer times prayer for the Iraqi people,” NAE president Ted Haggard said at the National Press Club. “The next few months might be the most important time of decision the people of Iraq have had in thousands of years.”

After 30 years of dictatorship under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi people “have to decide whether or not they believe in individual dignity, personal responsibility, due process, the rule of law, principles of individual freedom and liberty,” he said.

Haggard said the reconstruction of Iraq is God’s idea. “We know that God desires a better future for the Iraqi people,”

Haggard said. "He wants their children to have medical care and an education. He wants them well fed.

"He wants them to worship in freedom without intimidation. He wants them to be able to discuss the big issues of life, family, government, faith and a future without fear. He wants to bless them."

Observers note that Operation Iraqi Care's arrival is book-ended by two developments that impact Christian assistance to Iraq, an ancient biblical land.

Public opinion-makers have questioned whether evangelicals are, as New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd put it, mixing "a blend of kitchen pantry and Elmer Gantry" by sending help to the Iraqis. Critics have said evangelicals would aim to convert the mostly Muslim Iraqis to Christianity.

Interestingly, on the day Operation Iraqi Care was unveiled the United Nations lifted its sanctions on Iraq, which evangelical leaders say opened the road for the international community and humanitarian organizations to support the Iraqis in rebuilding their country.

Richard Cizik, NAE vice president for governmental affairs, called criticism of evangelical assistance to Iraq "erroneous thinking." He said the NAE's humanitarian-assistance arm, World Relief, which has 60 years' experience in relief work, and NAE member Samaritan's Purse "understand the rules of the road and are well prepared and experienced to respond to social and humanitarian needs."

While participating in a June 4 discussion about post-war

relief efforts in Iraq hosted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, World Vision Senior Vice President Bruce Wilkinson said the recent debate about joining humanitarian relief with Christian evangelism “is largely an American phenomenon brought on by the publicized comments of several high-profile conservative Christian leaders associated with humanitarian organizations.”

“It appears that this controversy is not an issue for the people of Iraq, Afghanistan or any other predominantly Muslim country ... that is receiving humanitarian aid from international religious [groups],” Wilkinson said. “When confronted with humanitarian emergencies, suffering people—no matter their religion—welcome aid from all sources as long as it is appropriate and delivered in a dignified manner.”

Missionary Ken Joseph Jr., who was in Iraq before the war and was among the first to bring relief into the nation, said that though Iraq was still a dangerous place, with guns blasting at night, the war’s end presented “the opportunity of a generation” to evangelize the nation.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity for the church to stand up and do something quickly,” said Joseph, who directs and helps funnel relief into Iraq.

He added that though Hussein is no longer in power, many Christians in Iraq—who are believed to make up roughly 2.5 percent of the population—fear backlash from radical Shiite Muslims if they attempt to proselytize. “The Christians don’t believe the Americans are going to stay for the long haul,” he said, “and they think [extreme] Muslims will take over the country.”

After meeting with Iraqi Christians in early June, World Relief president Clive Calver quoted church leaders as saying: "We are free. We can say anything now. It's a new era." He urged Christians to pray for the Iraqi people, adding that "we do not know how long the window [of opportunity] will stay open."

Ministries working inside Iraq plan to funnel assistance through local churches. Baltimore-based World Relief—poised to offer relief through partnerships with Assyrian and Chaldean churches, and Christian Arab communities in Jordan, Syria and Turkey—already has sent two assessment teams into Iraq, Executive Director Timothy Ziemer said. The teams have identified partnerships in health care, home rehabilitation, school feeding, medicines, educational supplies and food distribution.

The World Relief strategy in Iraq and the Arab world allows Arabs to help other Arabs, Ziemer said, adding that NAE's spiritual and financial assistance embraces both Muslims and Christians.

Samaritan's Purse, led by Franklin Graham, announced it stands "at the doorsteps of Iraq" ready to help war victims there. In addition World Vision already has distributed relief inside the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Al Rutba, and announced plans in June to deliver 3,200 packets of clothing, blankets and water in Al Rutba.

At the launch of Operation Iraqi Care Cizik said evangelicals in the United States "have come of age ... We take the Bible seriously in our humanitarian response." Those who join the Operation Iraqi Care effort can download a certificate reminding them to pray for Iraq and register to receive e-mail

updates of current events. Financial donations to help World Relief's work in Iraq will also be accepted at the Web sites () and ().

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