

The Cry Of IRAQ'S Church

Christians in Iraq have welcomed the end of Saddam Hussein's reign of terror. Now they are asking their brothers and sisters in the West to help them rebuild a broken nation.

Her words were most chilling. A Muslim woman whose son had committed the vicious murder of a 71-year-old Chaldean Catholic nun said: "Even if my son was hanged, I would still celebrate—because he entered a Christian home and bought a place in heaven."

With the killing, her son had secured an eternal reward from Allah, she believed. Her statement illustrated a depressing fact that could be seen and felt in postwar Iraq in May: Even a change of regime here will not stop some Muslim extremists from killing Christians.

Iraqi believers—a dwindling, defensive community of fewer than 500,000 people in an overwhelmingly Muslim state of 24 million—are fearful that hot-headed Shia clerics will get their wish and impose an Iran-style Islamic theocratic state, especially now that Saddam Hussein is gone. He made it his special mission to persecute the Shia Muslims, who make up 65 percent of the population.

Yet the nun's murder occurred in August of last year—while Hussein was still in charge, while believers were afforded at least a measure of protection. Later, he released the apprehended killer and his accomplices.

The victim—Sister Cecilia of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart

of the Chaldeans in Baghdad—was staying alone in the convent. In the morning, her devoted friend Sister Albertine found her stripped naked, wrists tied to her ankles and a leg broken. Her mouth was stuffed with rags. Her throat had been slit, and there were seven stab wounds in her torso.

“She had been turned to face the mosque, and there was a single dried tear on her cheek!” said Sister Albertine, sobbing, still traumatized by the memory.

The killers were caught—three of them, all neighbors of the nuns, all extremist Muslims. They were sentenced, but a month later Hussein released all criminals from prison.

Sister Cecilia’s killers came home to loud, celebratory parties. One of them lived across the street from the convent. The nuns fled their cloister with taunts in their ears and have not returned.

Said Sister Margaret, head of the order: “Sister Cecilia is a martyr. She was killed by families we reached out to daily and did nothing but good for. How can we have hope for the future when this is our experience?”

Her downcast sentiment was echoed by the sad words of an Iraqi pastor in Mosul, the country’s third-largest city. “We have forgotten how to dream,” he said. “This is the legacy of Saddam—he has taken away our capacity to dream.”

Everywhere the evidence is obvious that Saddam Hussein is no longer in power. His statues are toppled, his portraits defaced, his palaces vandalized. Yet he continues to rule in the Iraqi psyche.

Conversations with more than 20 church leaders as well as many lay Christians throughout Iraq yielded a most astonishing fact. With one or two exceptions, none of them could look to the future with any sense of excitement or ambition.

One pastor explained: "We just learned to survive under Saddam. He stamped out all ambition and daring. It was forbidden to dream under him. Those leaders who dreamed had to leave the country. The rest of us just huddled in the bunker."

But Bishop Salieba, Syrian Orthodox leader of Mosul, had hopeful words to say: "The war was good for us. ... It strengthened the faith of the Christians."

A Desert Experience

Iraq's Christians have been a dwindling minority for decades, mainly because of persecution and emigration. Yet there are signs that their faith is strengthening after the events of the last few months. Churches remained open throughout the Operation Iraqi Freedom bombing, and Christians gathered in groups of 10 to 20 when they could. Across all denominations the Psalms were read, chanted, sung and expounded, proving the special comfort the writings bring in times of extreme stress.

"Pastors [in Iraq] are as good as any I've met in the world today," says Clive Calver, president of the World Relief organization. Calver visited Iraq in June and came back encouraged that a "window of opportunity" has opened there for the gospel.

"Some of the churches are digging in or hunkering down,"

Calver told Charisma. "But the evangelical churches seem to be absolutely committed to praying and going out on a limb to go into the community and do something."

Evangelicals, who number fewer than 10,000 nationwide, speak positively of the spiritual fruits of the recent war.

Christians at the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in the oil city of Kirkuk shouted, "Hallelujah!" as the bombs fell. Their pastor, the Rev. Haitham al Jazrawi, told Charisma: "The people revived in their spirituality through the war. Before they were timid and asleep. But as we took our fears to God, we felt His presence more and more powerfully. This experience has ignited us. Pray this fire will grow in the future."

Iraq's Christians lack a fiery spirituality and boldness in their witness. "We have more roots than fruits!" quips Yousif Matti, founding pastor of the Evangelical Church of Kurdistan.

Iraqi churches are proud of their ancient roots. The sites of Old Testament Babylon, Nineveh and Ur lie on Iraqi soil, and the gospel was preached here by Eddai, a disciple of the apostle Thomas in the first century. A bewildering array of denominations trace their roots to the third and fourth centuries, including the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church. Some still read their liturgies in a version of Aramaic that is close to the language Jesus Himself spoke.

Yet for all their impressive lineage, the historical churches are inwardly focused, defensive and dwindling. "Centuries of domination under the Islamic yoke created a survival

mentality,” says Matti, who was raised a Chaldean Catholic before leaving his religious heritage in disgust. “The bargain was: ‘We’ll keep the gospel to our own racial groups, if you will let us exist in your Muslim society.’”

When Matti began to reach out to Muslims in the mid-1990s and brought some to be baptized, his bishop told him: “We should not be evangelizing Muslims. That will just get us into trouble.”

As ancient as the roots of Iraq’s historical churches are, the fruits are thin, and many Christians are utterly nominal, seeing their Christianity purely as a racial description, such as a Chaldean Christian or an Assyrian Christian. Churchgoing among these groups remains a minority practice.

Life for these churches under Hussein got little better. Some journalists contend that the Christians were privileged and cosseted by him, and it is true he supplied an organ here, a building permit there. However, pastor Haitham of the Evangelical Church in Mosul argues it would be an exaggeration to say Hussein protected the Christians.

“Saddam was not a clever leader—just a ruthless one,” he says. “He wiped out anyone who was a threat, like the Shiite leadership. But he didn’t consider the church to be a threat at all. After all, we were just a bunch of different squabbling communities too scared to evangelize.”

Pastor Haitham says he was “never once pressured to preach this or that” during Hussein’s rule. “But,” he adds, “if I had baptized a Muslim, they would have closed me down within the week.”

Ripening Fruit

A brighter picture emerges in northeastern Iraq, which from 1991 was a zone where Hussein's writ of law was forbidden to run. Four million Kurdish Muslims live there, some surprisingly receptive to the gospel.

While fleeing Hussein's assassins in 1992, Matti began an outreach in Dohuk. With outside aid, he began printing Christian Bibles and literature and started bookstores in three cities.

"Of course, everywhere we started a bookshop it was bombed by extremists," he said. He kept persevering, and some Muslims began to show a genuine interest in the Bible. They were receptive of classes about Christianity, and some became believers. The Kurdish Evangelical Church now has more than 1,000 believers, mostly converts from a Muslim background.

The church also has three bookshops, two FM radio stations and two international schools, one with 200 pupils in Sulaymaniyah. So impressed were Kurdish leaders with the school that they gave the church a \$500,000 plot of land on which to build a church in the city.

Matti is desperate to find 50 Western teachers for his school. "Come and teach the next generation of Kurdish leaders," he pleads.

Though the Kurds are easygoing and more liberal in their interpretation of Sunni Islam, there are still plenty of Islamic extremists around. Matti is constantly on the alert for assassins, having a policy never to open the door at

night, knowing gunmen are seeking to kill him.

The Kurdish Evangelical Church has two martyrs. Mansour Hussein, 41, was gunned down in the Christian bookshop of Irbil in 1997, and Zewar Mohammed Ismael, 38, a taxi driver from Zakho, was shot to death on Feb. 17.

Ismael converted to Christ four years ago and was bold in his witness. He kept Bibles in his car and gave them out to anyone who showed an interest. Most did not mind, but Islamic extremists were outraged.

He was named in the mosques as a menace to Islam, and the imams spread lies about him, claiming, "He has led 500 Muslims into apostasy in our town." His killer explained he was told by the prophet Muhammad in a dream to kill Ismael. He awaits trial in Zakho.

"This will not change in the future Iraq," Matti warns. "Indeed, it had better not. Martyrdom is a sign that we are reaching out, that we are not a dead church, that we are having an impact."

Iraqi Christians implore Western Christians to support them while they currently pray for three miracles to occur in their country.

Looking for Miracles

They want Iraq's Shiite community to embrace a pluralistic political system and work against the violent extremists within their ranks. Iraq's 24 million people are 65 percent

Shia. Because they were terribly repressed by Hussein, they now want influence, and some seek a theocracy like neighboring Iran's. At the very least, they expect Islam to be the state religion and Shariah law, the legal code of Islam, to be imposed in certain areas.

Some are prepared to use violence to ensure this. A Christian in Mosul warned: "We heard them say in the mosque: 'Do not give your weapons to the Americans. We will need them to protect Islam later.'"

It is unknown how militant the Shiite community truly is. Currently, it is the clerics' turn to espouse opinion, but the ordinary Muslim is not as fanatical. Father Yousif Thoma of Baghdad says half-jokingly, "Once they get satellite dishes they will lose their appetite for religious warfare."

Most Christian leaders are not so sanguine and believe it will take a miracle to stop Iraq from degenerating into what Thoma calls "religious identity wars." Christians at least want a state that guarantees religious freedom.

They want foreign Protestant missionaries to show great sensitivity to the culture and work with, not independently of, local Christians. Many Iraqi church leaders are fearful that a rerun of the bitter evangelicals versus the Orthodox disputes of the 1990s that followed the dismantling of the Soviet Union will play out in their country as well.

"For one thing," Thoma told Charisma, "I don't want [evangelicals] to create headaches for us that we do not have already. If they give out tracts in the street, if they are aggressive and insensitive, they will foment religious tension

and could get killed.

“Come, but work with us,” he adds. “Don’t leapfrog us.”

This in itself may require a miracle, however, because many of the historical churches define Christian maturity in very different—some would even say “anti-evangelical”—terms. Because the evangelicals are not likely to be welcomed by many of the local churches, the nation’s Christians hope for the third miracle.

They want leaders of the historical churches to welcome the assistance of Western evangelicals. The historical churches are not devoid of spiritual life. There are many active and bold priests as well as the occasional bishop. Salieba, the leader of the Syrian Orthodox community in Mosul, stated that he would “welcome the production of more evangelical literature to help us preach better.”

This is not the normal attitude of most bishops and priests toward evangelicals. When many of them hear the word evangelical they think of a Jehovah’s Witness, a schismatic or a cultist. Evangelicals are perceived as a threat, not a help.

Tension has already played out in relations between the Evangelical Church of Kurdistan and historical church leaders. Some laypeople confronted their bishops in the late 1990s after seeing how active the evangelicals were.

They told them: “We talk of martyrs 10 centuries ago—these people in our midst have martyrs from today. We talk of being the love of Christ to the community—yet for all our centuries here we have built no schools, started no hospitals or printed

few books. But these Christians started in 1992, and now they have schools, radio stations, bookshops and printing presses.”

Stung by the criticism, most bishops reacted only with vituperation toward the evangelicals. The Chaldean Patriarch went so far as to label evangelicals “U.S. spies.” Replacing such division with unity seems far off, especially when, for the moment, Iraq’s Christians just want to step outside their doors in safety.

As darkness falls in Baghdad, armed looting gangs emerge to control the streets. Christians cower in darkened homes without electricity, dreading every footstep. The benefits of peace have been proclaimed but not yet experienced.

“The present anarchy is harder to bear than the bombing,” says a Baghdad Christian, the sound of gunfire erupting outside.

To that, another adds: “Our presiding demon—Saddam—is gone, and with wise administration things will improve, but the road ahead for this country is still full of mines. We need your prayers.”

God Is Our Refuge

Iraqi Christians say it was a miracle that there were so few Christian casualties during the recent war.

Iraqi Christians were thankful that no Muslim-Christian

rioting broke out during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and many said this was largely because of the actions of Western—especially European—Christians.

Father Luis Zakho, a Chaldean Catholic priest in Mosul said, “The government was desperate to urge Muslims to attack Christians and cast the whole conflict in terms of a Christian crusade, but the anti-war stance of the pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and thousands of marching Christians meant the Muslims were not susceptible to ‘holy war’ rhetoric.”

Ordinary Iraqi Christians have an ambivalent attitude toward the American-British “occupation-liberation.”

On one hand, they are overjoyed to see the end of Saddam Hussein, and for that alone some believe the war was worth it. They also give thanks for the miracle that so few civilians from the Christian communities lost their lives—fewer than 30.

On the other hand, many believe a regime change could have been achieved without the terrible costs of war, especially when they consider that the benefits of peace for many people have not been felt since hostilities ended on April 10.

In Baghdad, particularly, all church meetings have been rescheduled to mornings. It is too dangerous to come out at night where the looters rule the streets.

Rasha, an attractive young woman at the youth meeting of the Evangelical Church observed: “There are three main types of violence now in Baghdad. Young women on their own are being snatched and raped, owners of nice cars are being carjacked by robbers, and anyone who has an enemy is taking a gun and

shooting them, knowing the law will never catch up with them.”

In early May, a member of the Evangelical Church was shot as he resisted carjackers. Currently he is paralyzed from the waist down.

Looking ahead, pastor Ikram Mehani of the Baghdad Evangelical Church warned: “The next two years will be crucial. The Americans must clearly be seen to be governing Iraq in the interests of the people, rather than for the economic interests of themselves. If the public perception is that they are just after our oil, then this resentment will fuel Muslim extremism and it will be us Christians who suffer first.”

A Martyr's Tragic Story

Zewar Mohammed Ismael, like all Kurdish Muslims who choose to follow Christ, faced certain death.

No, I am happy in my faith,” were the last words of Zewar Mohammed Ismael, 38, a taxi driver and convert to Christianity from Islam. A man had just walked into the taxi station seeking for Ismael by name. Other taxi drivers recall the man asking him, “Will you come back to Islam?”

After Ismael's reply, he was invited to take tea with the man. As the other drivers walked away, they heard shots. Ismael lay dead with 28 bullets in his body—18 in his face, 10 in his chest.

His road had been a hard one since his conversion four years ago until his death on February 17, though typical of the level of opposition a Muslim has to face in turning to Christ. After he converted, Ismael—a Kurd from Zakho—was kidnapped by his own father, who took him to a remote desert location and threatened to kill him if he did not convert back to Islam.

During the last four months of his life he knew he was being shadowed by Islamic extremists, but the night before he was shot he had said at a prayer meeting: “I won’t flee. My place is here.”

Islamic culture, even in more liberal Kurdistan, forbids any Muslim to leave the faith. Many converts do not even tell their families they have become Christians. They meet in small, secret cell groups of five to 10 people, varying the locations to throw extremist pursuers off the trail.

In addition to his wife, Ismael leaves five children between the ages of 9 months and 18 years. None of them are Christians, but Ismael’s Muslim family has disowned them nevertheless, blaming the wife for his conversion. If it were not for the church they would be starving.

Said the pastor of Ismael’s church in Zakho: “A Kurdish Muslim convert to Christ has to assume each day will be their last. The level of stress they have to live with is frightening. But the danger keeps them especially close to Christ.

“Zewar’s faith was so precious to us. There was nothing he loved to do more than study the Scriptures and share about Jesus—it was like Stephen from the book of Acts had come to live with us.”

Risking His Life for the Kurds

Yousif Matti hasn't let death threats stop his evangelistic work.

He has survived two kidnapping attempts and two assassinations. His bookshops and schools have been bombed more times than he can accurately remember. Yet Yousif Matti, founding pastor of the Evangelical Church of Kurdistan, is still full of fire and vigor. He's making more plans, even though he confesses, "Every time the phone rings, I dread to pick it up because it might be a death threat."

After fleeing into Kurdistan in 1992 to begin evangelistic work, he began printing Christian literature on a tiny press in the mountain city of Dohuk, and was given money to buy a store from which to sell books. Within a year there was a cell-church community of 25 converts from Islam.

In June 1994, in the face of constant opposition, he launched an FM radio station in Dohuk called The Voice of Life. It plays Christian music and Christian teaching eight hours a day.

He opened three more bookstores, though one in Zakho was bombed a year and a half ago and has not reopened. In 1998, another radio station was started in Sulaymaniyah, and he began two international schools—one in Sulaymaniyah and one in Dohuk—with 250 pupils, some of them children of high-ranking Kurdish officials. He now has a Heidelberg printing press

that enables him to print literally hundreds of thousands of books.

Yet at every step of the way Matti has to fight.

“Despite official permission, nothing goes smoothly,” he says.

In Sulaymaniyah, after he had spent \$20,000 making the school premises habitable, the government wanted to take the property back. He successfully resisted them. In Irbil a government minister tried to shut the radio work down, but Matti took him to court, using Kurdistan’s more liberal laws, and won.

It’s not all toil and trouble, however.

In Sulaymaniyah he recalls explaining to the Muslim parents, “This is a Christian school.” There was an uproar, and he thought he was going to be hung on the spot, until one of the parents spoke up timidly and said: “Well, you see, what we are worried about is that our children will come back to us from school knowing lots of Bible stories, but we do not know the Bible, and we will be embarrassed. Can you provide Bible classes for us too?”

Matti welcomes outside assistance. He needs 50 English teachers for his primary schools, Bible teachers to train his pastors, and anyone with administrative and technical skills to teach the fledgling churches the essential skills of running organizations. It’s a remarkable opportunity.

The 4 million Kurds are the Medes of the Bible. Before Islam forcibly converted them in the seventh century, many were

Christians. People such as Yousif Matti believe they can be again.

Bringing Compassion to Iraq

Christians are providing the staples of life to needy Iraqis who suffered during the war

While many Americans are welcoming the end of their involvement in Iraq and looking forward to getting back to their loved ones, many others are just beginning their work in the newly freed nation through humanitarian relief efforts. Numerous Christian relief agencies are in the process of providing aid and spreading the love of Christ to these oppressed people.

Iraq's poverty issues are serious. Even before the war, Iraqis were barely hanging on by the rations provided through the Public Distribution System (PDS). The collapse of the Iraqi regime also caused the collapse of the PDS, leaving the majority of the population with little food to survive on.

On top of this—because of the bombings, looting and the poor conditions that existed before the war—most Iraqi cities have no water, no power, and few functioning schools or hospitals.

Many of the problems could be solved simply with some resources and initiative, says David Robinson, regional vice president for World Vision International in the Middle East and Europe. He says that in Al Rutbah, a city in western Iraq,

one of World Vision's early assessment teams found that the city needed to turn on the town generator in order to restore running water and electricity. All they needed was \$25, mostly for gas, to bring in an electrician from another city to repair the generator.

"Twenty-five dollars to restore electricity and water to 25,000 [people]," Robinson says with a hint of incredulity.

The main thrust of Iraqi relief will come from the U.N. World Food Programme (WFP), which plans to spend \$1.3 billion and get the PDS up and running again. However, they cannot do it alone. Many Christian relief organizations are working alongside the WFP and reaching places the U.N. initiative has not.

World Vision plans to spend about \$20 million in Iraq over two years. Initially, they are just trying to "help communities get back on their own feet," Robinson says.

World Vision started its first major response effort in May, registering displaced Iraqi families for relief alongside the WFP. They are also providing large container loads filled with medicine, clothes, food and water-filtration devices.

Several other Christian organizations are also sending large containers filled with food and supplies. About 2.5 million pounds of supplies should be arriving in Iraq from Convoy of Hope, Feed the Hungry and Feed the Children.

World Relief, the assistance arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, will be working with local churches and Christian communities to meet needs among the people. World

Relief's president, Clive Calver, says he hopes to spend about \$2 million for intervention in six villages in northern Iraq that will involve resettlement of families, rehabilitation of town infrastructures, and provision of starter-home and school kits.

Says Calver: "We have found churches that have the potential to really make a significant impact in northern Iraq—but these churches have nothing because they've lost everything. And they're prepared to give everything for Jesus. They just need the resources to make the impact."

Chris Glazier

Charisma is raising funds to help World Relief's work in Iraq. All gifts will aid Iraqi churches that have been affected by the war. Send your tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, "Operation Iraqi Care," P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248, or [click here](#) to donate securely online.

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