

The Aramaic Language of Jesus Still Echoes Here, but This Christian Enclave Is on the Brink

One of the world's oldest Christian communities is on the brink of disappearing. Decades of war and persecution in Iraq have driven most believers out of the country, but all hope is not lost.

In Erbil, just beyond the ancient citadel, lies a neighborhood unlike any other. This is Ankawa, a Christian enclave that has endured for nearly 2,000 years. Here, people still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

Archbishop of Erbil Bashar Matti Warda said, "This is a place of evangelization; this is a place where Christianity came right in the First Century."

The Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church all trace their roots to this land, making Iraq home to some of the oldest Christian communities on earth.

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Today, however, that ancient presence is fading. The Christian population here has been shrinking for decades.



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"Every time there's a crisis, there's a war, there is violence, there is persecution, these old wounds start bleeding again," Archbishop Warda said.

Before the invasion in 2003, Iraq was home to as many as 1.5 million Christians. Today, fewer than 130,000 remain. "It's a frightening, frightening situation," Archbishop Warda said.

Ano Jawhar Abdoka, Minister of Transportation and Communications, is the only Christian member of the Kurdish government's cabinet. He says wave after wave of violence has pushed Christians out of their homes.

After the U.S. invasion came the rise of ISIS, which forced more than 100,000 Christians to flee.

Abdoka said, "1,100 churches were attacked, 1,328 Christians were killed on identity only in just two years, so our people were targeted because we are Christians."

Among those who left decades ago and made the decision to come back is Dilan Adamat.

"I used to come here as a child for holiday, just for a few weeks and going back to France was always a bit frustrating because I was missing here, there was something missing in my life which was my Iraqi side after growing up in France," he said.

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