

'Vicar of Baghdad' Boasts Happiest Church, Despite Murders

Despite more than 200 congregants murdered this year, weekly kidnappings and frequent church bombings, Iraqi Anglican Canon Andrew White says his Baghdad church of 4,000 people is  among the happiest he's ever seen.

"So many Christians have been killed," White said in an exclusive interview with *Charisma*. "Yet the church in Iraq is so happy—miraculously happy. The fact that the church is like this is incredible. And they've got a huge amount to teach us."

St. George's Church, located in Baghdad's Red Zone, is one of the only Anglican churches in Iraq. Though an estimated 800,000 Christians have fled the area in recent years, the church has grown to become the country's largest.

White says more than 550 Muslim individuals attend St. George's, though there may be more, given that most Muslims in Iraq face the threat of death upon publicly confessing Jesus as Lord. Last year White baptized 13 Muslims; within a week, 11 of them were murdered.

"We say to them, 'You realize this is dangerous,' and they always say, 'We just love and want to follow Jesus,'" White says.

To guard against suicide bombers and other attacks, St. George's is surrounded by at least 30 armed officers, and each worshipper is searched before entering the church building. But with unrest now part of daily life, White says the church must be a beacon of peace to a nation filled with turmoil.

“That’s very important,” he says. “We can’t talk about reconciliation or peace-making without actually providing for the needs of people.”

Operating on a \$177,000 monthly budget, the church supplies weekly groceries to more than 4,000 each week and provides free medical care to everyone in the area. Its compound currently has a medical facility housing four doctors and three dentists, as well as a pharmacy and laboratory. The church plans to open a school and provide money for housing to their mostly Muslim recipients.

✖ Known as the “Vicar of Baghdad,” White is also the founder of the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East, through which he has mediated hundreds of hostage negotiations and peace agreements. But this London native says that sharing Christ’s love with the Iraqi people overshadows the dangerous situations he often finds himself.

“Despite the difficulty, you have to love the people. Part of worship is loving,” he says. “When Jesus went about his work He preached and healed. And that is what we aim to do: preach and heal.”

To that degree, White says healings and miracles are a normal part of the church’s life, as are angelic visitations and divine acts of protection.

“When you’ve lost everything you realize that Jesus is all you have left,” he says. “And that’s all we have is Jesus.

“The church has continued under much opposition. It’s grown to be large, so strong,” he says. “So awful are the things around us and yet we’re the most happiest church I’ve ever pastored.”