

Church Bells Now Silent in Iraq

At least 100,000 Christians fled the Plain of Nineveh last summer.

The Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group has since invaded northern Iraq and occupies both the churches and homes of Christians. Only the Kurdish autonomous region is still a safe area for Christians and other minorities.

Matthea Vrij, a Dutch reporter, went to look for the displaced in Erbil, Kurdistan. She had an unexpected encounter with an old acquaintance.

Facts:

In 2003, Iraq had 1.5 million Christians. They are called Assyrians or Chaldeans, and they speak modern Aramaic. But their number is now estimated at roughly 400,000. In 11 years' time, more than two-thirds fled, emigrated or were killed. One of the largest attacks in Baghdad in 2010 killed 68 people.

"Abuna Mazen! It's you!" My voice sounds too loud in the small field hospital. I had hoped to find the priest in this metropolis, and I am surprised that he is sitting here, surrounded by hundreds of people who have set up camp in a churchyard. They have been camping here in Kurdistan since August. All of them were forced to flee from ISIS.

In 2011, I had an extensive interview with Abuna ("Father" in Aramaic) Mazen Ishoa at his church in Qaraqosh, east of Mosul in the Plain of Nineveh. Now that I meet him again three years later, he says that he is in the tent camp to visit and support believers spiritually. "This is vital because there is a lot of spiritual distress," he tells me.

A nurse also says that depression occurs often here in the refugee camp.

Another family from Abuna Mazen's city share of their distress. Showing me a photo, the father tells me, "This was my daughter. She died of an ISIS mortar, along with two neighbor children. She was 36."

The father, brothers and sister of the murdered woman, Inaam Isho Poulos, are now living in an empty office. "It was to be a wonderful day; she was to be engaged that day. But she was buried instead," Inaam's sister tells me.

She explains that, though tragic, there was "perhaps a reason that she died." When her sister was hit by the mortar, she says, "The exodus began, just in time. Thousands of people were rescued by her death."

Women who might have otherwise been kidnapped and raped by the ISIS militants were also saved. Inaam's sister recalls that the church bells in the Plain of Nineveh rang to warn the people. The church bells stopped ringing after that night, when the Christians fled. For the first time in 1,600 years, they are silent.

Abuna Mazen doesn't know if he will ever return to Qaraqosh. Though he was away in Europe when the mortar shell struck his city and killed Inaam, he has been forced to flee terrorist attacks in the past. In 2010, he left Mosul after his father and two brothers were slaughtered like animals in their own home. There was little to prevent Islamic terrorists from doing what they wanted even then.

And in 2007, the terrorists kidnapped him and held him captive for a week. Did all these experiences give him all the more reason to hate Islamic extremists?

"No. I tell you the same as I told you three years ago: I hold no grudge against the extremists. 'Love your enemies,' Jesus

says. And the Bible is clear: 'If you follow Me, you will be persecuted.'"

Abuna Mazen says that in spite of centuries of difficulties, God will make a way. He is studying to become the manager of a monastery in Iraq. "Yes, here in Iraq! Christianity will remain here."