

4 April 2023

Update on St. George's in Baghdad, Iraq

I would like to thank you and your congregation for having supported the work St. George's Anglican Church in Baghdad, via Mosaic Middle East in the past. As I am in regular contact with the vicar of St. George's, I thought it would be good to update you on the protracted and worsening situation for Christians in Iraq right now.

Background of St. George's

St. George's Church, as you are aware, is the only Anglican Church in Iraq and is part of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf. Iraq is home to the oldest continuously practising body of Christians in the world and in the 1990s there was an estimated 1.5 million Christians in Iraq. Since then, war, persecution and violence has reduced the numbers dramatically with around 150 thousand Christians remaining. St. George's is situated in the centre of Baghdad, not far from the 'mighty' Tigris river, and is led by Rev'd Canon Faez Jirjees. Being a beacon of Jesus' light in a Muslim led country is a difficult and precarious path to tread. Over the years there have been many attacks on the Church, the security team and on the congregation. Yet despite being persecuted for their faith the Church has reached out to the poorest with food vouchers, it opened a medical clinic in 2007 to give free healthcare to the most desperate and poor, and it also runs a school to ensure even the poorest of children may receive an education. So where are things now?

Another Period of Uncertainty and Unrest

Iraq is undergoing a period of political unrest right now. The political party in Government isn't the one that won the election, and the public are not happy. As Rev'd Faez told us recently; "I set out in the morning to make visits on my congregation, or to have appointments with local leaders, but when I see a demonstration going on I have to stop and turn around. It is just the way things are here. It stops us carrying out our daily work and we need your prayers for peace and justice." As we saw back in the autumn, when the self-appointed Government took power, it is all too easy for demonstrations to become violent with devastating results.

Desperate Poverty is on the Rise

Rev'd Faez also told us this week about how "Miserable the financial situation is right now for Christians. We regularly give of our own salary to feed the congregation. I feel so helpless when you see their urgent need. They need help with so many things, but hunger is the greatest issue right now. It is more important to give them humanitarian aid than to simply preach the word of God to them."

He then explained that if you are Christian in Iraq, it doesn't matter how many degrees or qualifications you may have, as the majority of jobs are with the Government and they give them to their; relatives, friends, neighbours and to other Muslims. Christians are left to fill the lowest of jobs, they try to make money selling services or items on the street but with all the demonstrations that are going on it is impossible and unsafe to make a living. With the rising price of food and fuel families just can't afford to buy food, let alone to pay for the energy to cook it. The current situation is so desperate for them. "They all dress as smart as they can, to give a front that all is going well, but when I see their homes I just know they are not making ends meet. We need to do more. Those who are able have moved away to another country. The situation looks so bleak, and I can't see anything changing for the better over the next decade." said Rev'd Faez. And this is the fundamental truth of any lengthy conflict, it disrupts the order and nature of everything, and it can take many decades to recover and leaves so many families in a dire position for a very long time. They sadly are in a worse state now, compared to a few years ago.

Restrictions on Participating in the Eucharist

In the last month a new law in Iraq has prevented the selling or use of alcohol. Whilst this sounds like a good idea to many, it means that if Christians are found drinking wine as part of the eucharist they can be arrested and receive a criminal record. This is seen as a big attack on their freedom of religious beliefs. Additionally, many Christians in Iraq have made a living out of running a liquor store, but now they have lost their business and their family income. It is yet another restriction on their ability to live in their home country, a country that has had a Christian community since the first century when the Apostle Thomas shared the good news.

He Gives Strength to the Weary and Increases the Power of the Weak - Isaiah 40:29

With the clear urgency and despair of the situation, Rev'd Faez is driven to act to prevent the situation from worsening and to make improvements to individual lives wherever he can. As well as providing humanitarian aid, offering schooling to the poorest and medical care free of charge. He works tirelessly to advance the freedom for Christians and other minority religions to practice their faith in Iraq freely. He meets with local leaders of all faiths and political persuasions to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation. He also advocates for persecuted minorities at an international level.

In recognition of his outstanding service, earlier in March he was presented an MBE by Lord Ahmad, Minister of State for the Middle East, North African, South Asia and the United Nations. Leaders from many other faiths and political leaders also attended to recognise the importance of Rev'd Faez's mission for the people of Iraq and for all vulnerable groups.

Supporting Christians across the Middle East

At Mosaic Middle East we focus on supporting Christians facing persecution. We also work through partners in the north of Iraq to empower and enable families to rebuild their lives, livelihoods and to restore hope. In Jordan we support the Iraqi Christians who became refugees when ISIS invaded and have not found it safe enough to return. They remain in limbo, as they can not work and we provide them with access to food, clothing, education and therapeutic psycho-social classes at our Olive Tree Centres. The Centres also reach out to support other refugees, whatever their background or origin. We also lobby for the Freedom of Religion or Belief.

How you can help

At Mosaic Middle East we know the biggest thing we can all do is to pray. Donations are also vital to keep these projects running. We are so grateful for the income provided through our Christian brothers and sisters across the country and we are humbled that Churches and individuals maintain their support for what has become a protracted crisis. We know that many donors have felt the need to support other emergencies over the last year, but at the same time we know that continued support for the work of Rev'd Faez is essential for the Christians and for the poorest of Baghdad to survive. St. George's offers hope, help and healing to those who are "bottom of the bottom" in society, and it therefore attracts people from many different religious backgrounds to its services, it really is an oasis for those most in need. We thank you for your interest, prayers and support to St. George's.

May I wish you and your congregation a wonderful Easter.

Yours Sincerely



Helen Jackson,
Executive Director