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My personal experience in Gaza and Jordan

Hanna Massad

Every fifty to seventy years, political or religious upheavals dramatically change the face of the Middle East. The Church needs to be ready to meet the challenges that accompany these changes if it is going to be God’s instrument of love, peace and reconciliation, and if we are going to share and demonstrate the Gospel of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One big change in the Middle East has been the rise of militant Islam, which started in the 1980s when the Ayatollah Sayyed Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini rose to power in Iran. People have become more religious and more militant, particularly over the past twelve years.

The negative influence of radical Islam became even worse after the terrorist attack in the United States on September 11, 2001. The US response to these attacks and its subsequent invasion of Iraq were seen by many Muslims as a war between Islam and Christianity, which led to horrible persecution against Christians throughout the Middle East. Christians began an exodus that continues to increase even unto today from the birthplace of the Church to Europe, America, and other countries. We need to ask ourselves how this affects the Church in the Middle East and how the Church needs to prepare to face these challenges.

The persecution I have experienced and witnessed over the past decade is hardly new in the history of the Middle Eastern Church. We heard about it from our grandparents and parents and read about it in the books of church history.

Christianity, which originated in the region, was the major religion from the fourth century until the Saracen Muslim conquests of the seventh century. Today, Christians make up only five per cent of the population of the Middle East, down from twenty per cent in the early twentieth century. The percentages are dropping, mostly due to low birth rates compared to Muslims and emigration due to persecution and to the economical situation . At the present rate, it is estimated that the twelve million Christians in the Middle East will be cut in half by the year 2020. Christian father Terullianus said, „The blood of the matryrs is the seed of the Church.“ This is true, but not always.

In an interview with Stan Guthrie, Philip Jenkins, author and Professor of Humanities at Pennsylvania State University, said, „The Church [in these regions] will probably cease to exist within my lifetime.“ Christianity flourished in North Africa (Algeria and Tunisia), the land of Augustine, until the Muslims conquered Carthage in 698 AD, and a century later only a few Christians remained.

I have seen a Church die as a result of indifference. I also know that what kills churches is persecution. What kills a Church is armed force, usually in the interest of another religion or

an antireligious ideology. Sometimes, this even results in genocide, the eradication of a particular ethnic community that practices Christianity.

But what about Tertullian? Why does persecution sometimes strengthen a Church and at other times wipe it out? The key is how far the Church establishes itself within a culture or nation as compared to becoming the Church of a particular segment, class, or ethnic group.

In North Africa, it was basically the Church of Romans and Latin-speakers, as opposed to the Church of peasants, with whom the Romans had little contact. When the Romans went, Christianity went with them. In Egypt, Christianity established itself very early as the faith of the common man. As a result, after almost fourteen centuries under Muslim rule, there is still a thriving Coptic Church that represents perhaps ten per cent of the Egyptian people – which I would submit is the greatest example of Christian survival in history.

How does this lesson apply to Iraq, where Christians are under pressure from Muslims?

Iraq is a classic example of a Church that was killed over time. I agree with Philip Jenkins that the Iraqi Church will probably cease to exist within my lifetime. It has probably gone from about 5 per cent to 0.5 per cent in the past 50 years. One can not continue losses like that forever. At some point, you are down to the last Christian.

My experience in Gaza

In the past twelve years, Gaza has changed so much and become such a threat to Christians that I had to evacuate my family. We lived between two fires – the fire of the Israeli occupation and the fire of Islamic militants.

In addition to the physical dangers, we had to deal with how the Church should address the political situation, as well as theological issues concerning the Israeli occupation and the theology of the land. We had to figure out how to explain these difficult issues in a simple and practical way to believers who face threats and persecution every day and we had to teach them how to maintain a spirit of forgiveness and how to keep their hearts pure in the midst of ethnic and religious oppression.

In Gaza, my personal life situation and ministry scene changed dramatically in 2006 when we began to receive threats, demanding that we close the Palestinian Bible Society bookstore that my wife directed. We did not, and in February, two pipe bombs exploded at the front door.

A little over a year later, on Sunday morning, April 15, 2007, two masked men kidnapped the bookstore security guard, beat him, and then released him. An hour later, they returned and detonated a much larger bomb at the doorway.

Then, on October 7, the unthinkable happened. Our beloved brother Rami Ayad, who managed the bookstore, was kidnapped and, after ten hours, was shot because of his faith in Jesus Christ. After that, about ten families, most of them in Church leadership, evacuated Gaza and moved to the West Bank. It was like living the book of Acts when „a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.“

The Church was not ready to face this huge challenge. For a while, Christians were afraid to even come close to the church building. Many of the leaders remain in exile. But thank the

Lord, the church in Gaza, in these days, is still moving forward and fulfils its ministry in the wider community.

The waves of immigrants coming to Jordan

Few realized how the US invasion in 2003 would affect the Iraqi people, especially Iraqi Christians and even Christians throughout the Middle East. It cost many tragic deaths. But it also unleashed a wave of persecution that has decimated the Church.

America's lack of a post-war plan, shattering Iraqi society, poured gasoline on already strained Sunni-Shiite hostilities, and caused horrible persecution for the unarmed, unprotected minorities, especially Christians.

Iraqi Christians have known persecution for centuries. In the 14th Century, 70,000 Assyrian Christians were beheaded in Tikrit and 90,000 more in Baghdad, launching a massive exodus to other countries. Nevertheless, even as late as the 16th Century, Christians still accounted for half of the Iraqi population.

In 1987, the last Iraqi census counted 1,4 million Christians. But though they account for less than 5 per cent of the population of Iraq, according to the United Nations, they make up to 40 per cent of refugees living in neighbouring countries.

Why are Christian communities so vulnerable? First, they have been the victims of targeted activity, notably kidnapping, because many Christians are well-educated professional people and are perceived to have more money or access to money from Western Christians. They are also a minority that is unlikely to respond violently, having no large tribe to protect or avenge them. Second, they are targets of religious extremists.

I minister to hundreds of Iraqi refugees in Jordan. When I ask about their stories, why they came to Jordan, many say that they received personal threats from militants who told them to convert to Islam, leave, or die.

Maher's older brother was killed by militants, and Maher received personal threats. Linda, his wife, attended Sidat El Naja Church in Baghdad where, on October 31, 2010, five Sunni suicide bombers entered, walked down the aisle into the midst of the worshippers, and detonated themselves. One of the mothers in our church lost her son in that same Sunday meeting.

There are more stories like this. Audie was the driver for his church. One day, militants attacked the car and killed his priest and three deacons. Ibtisam, a young mother of three, was badly burned as she left a church service when a car, left on the side of the road to target Christians, exploded.

Our ministry to Iraqi refugees in Jordan was started after the first Gulf War through the vision of Brother Victor Hashwa and his brother Yousif, who pastors the Alliance Christian Church in Amman. As pastor of the Iraqi refugee church in Amman, I would summarize our ministry as sharing the Good News, discipling new believers, and commissioning them as they emigrate to other countries. For most, Jordan is more of a transition point than a final destination. Iraqi refugees stay for several years until they are able to emigrate. We have produced many pastors and leaders who have gone on to plant churches in their new countries.

Our first challenge is always to meet the spiritual needs of the Iraqi refugees. To this end, we have a full church service every Tuesday and have special discipleship meetings for those who want to grow in their faith. In addition, we conduct home visitations to listen to them, encourage them, pray, and have good fellowship.

Second, we meet their physical needs. Most refugees arrive with the clothes on their backs and very little else. The United Nations tries to help with rent, but it is rarely enough. Our food relief program provides basic food for refugee families several times a year, each distribution providing enough food for about two weeks. We provide free medical clinics twice a week with donated medicines and volunteer physicians from America. We try, however, to make the refugees realize that they must not rely on relief for the long run, or they will become dependent and lazy.

Until 2007, the Jordanian government did not allow the children of Iraqi refugees to attend public schools. Even now that they are allowed, it is very difficult for Christian children who must face the challenges of a different culture. Iraqi refugees are not permitted to work in Jordan unless they have at least 25,000 USD in the bank. Most do not have this much money.

Third, we minister to their emotional needs. Understandably, many of the refugees have been traumatized by the persecution. They are afraid of the future, suffering from culture shock, concerned about family members they had to leave behind, afraid for their children, worried about how they will eat and put a roof over their heads. With the help of Christian psychologists and psychiatrists, we are learning to provide the counseling they need.

We also encourage Iraqi believers who are called to the ministry to start their theological training at Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS) while they are waiting to emigrate to other countries. In addition, a quilt project for women helps women to work with their hands and support their families.

One of the personal challenges that I face in this ministry is the limited resources of the Church to help families with no money and no ability to earn money, families, who are struggling to survive, often for years, until they can emigrate. Another challenge is the constant turnover, as we say goodbye to some and welcome the constant stream of new arrivals.

To summarize: the body, soul and spirit of the Middle East is constantly changing. The church needs to be prepared to meet the challenges that accompany those changes. For minorities, change often means persecution. As evangelical Christians, we are the minority of the minority. Yet, persecution is inseparable from Christianity.

„Dear friends,“ Peter wrote. „Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.“ (1 Peter 4:12-13)

But the Church needs to be prepared for it when this situation comes. When we are prepared, it will purify and strengthen us. It will not destroy us. We will seize it as an opportunity to be the Church and to change our cultures to the glory of God.

It has been a very humbling experience for me during the past two-and-a-half years to minister to my brothers and sisters from Iraq, listening to their narratives, laughing and crying together. Even though I am the first pastor they have had who is not Iraqi, we are bonded by the persecution we have experienced. We are brothers in blood and in Christ.