



Relationship with GOD

More than Just SUNDAY

Persecuted Christians in Iraq Need Our Prayers and Support

This past Friday, June 29, marked the conclusion of “Religious Freedom Week,” proclaimed by the U.S. Bishops. While we in the U.S. certainly face challenges, we can celebrate recent advances in religious freedom (positive federal policies and Supreme Court rulings). The situation around the world, however, continues to be perilous, indeed life-and-death. The article below is adapted courtesy of Crux (www.cruxnow.com) and describes both the persecution and the hope of our Christian brothers and sisters in Iraq, a region that constitutes the very cradle of Christianity. Please pray for them and learn how you can help.

On Nineveh Plains, Christians trapped between hope and experience

In the famous Bible story, the ancient city of Nineveh responded to Jonah’s preaching and repented. Today, however, Christians on the Nineveh Plains, a fabled swath of land that overlaps the dividing line between northern Iraq and Kurdistan, have found it’s not quite so easy to change peoples’ hearts and minds.

Ironically, in 2008 the Nineveh Plains actually was floated as a possible safe haven for Christians from other areas of the country being driven from their homes by what would eventually come to be recognized as the Islamic State’s (ISIS) genocidal campaign.

In 2014, that genocide reached the plains. A cluster of villages that had been traditionally Christian for two millennia was wiped out, while tens of thousands of residents fled for their lives. Many headed for the Christian enclave of Ankawa in nearby Erbil, which is today claimed as the capital of an independent Kurdistan.

While in theory those fleeing Christians could have sought refuge in a UN-sponsored camp, very few ever did, fearing that the jihadist hatred that put them at risk at home wouldn’t have much difficulty penetrating the porous confines of a Muslim-dominated refugee camp either. Thus, they turned to the churches, turning courtyards, parks and streets in Ankawa into vast informal settlements.

Some of those Christians decided to leave the region altogether, most seeking new lives abroad in Australia, North America or Europe, but the majority stuck it out - in part out of a rugged determination that Christianity wouldn’t be wiped out of its historic homeland, in part with hope that the Iraqi government with U.S. support would eventually get the situation under control, and, in part too, for a simple lack of better choices.

Today things are moving forward, and Christians of this historic cradle of the faith are beginning to make



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their way back. That fact is all the more remarkable given that support for the rebuilding effort from public sources such as the UN has been all but non-existent. It's been made possible almost entirely by private donors, many of them Catholic, such as the papal foundation Aid to the Church in Need supporting persecuted Christians around the world and the Knights of Columbus.

From 2014 to 2017, Aid to the Church in Need alone has delivered \$4 million in help for the Nineveh Plains, including 20 emergency aid projects and 19 reconstruction efforts. Among other tangible signs of that help, convents in the Christian villages of Bashiqa, Teleskuf and Qaraqosh have been rebuilt.

Yet after all that's happened, nobody is treating the goal of a stable, secure future for Christianity on the Nineveh Plains as an inevitability. Stephen Rasche, a counselor to the Archdiocese of Erbil who serves as coordinator of the reconstruction effort, knows well that conflict over the future of Kurdish-controlled territories could still erupt anytime. Moreover, although ISIS may be reeling militarily at the moment, they've proven surprisingly good at retreating and reloading, and no one believes the threat has been completely snuffed out.

What happens over the next few months is critical, he said, perhaps especially how a U.S. administration, which has voiced its concern for persecuted Christians repeatedly, chooses to deploy its resources and political influence.

A surprising share of the Christians of the Nineveh Plains have stuck it out this far, Rasche said, and there remains real hope of getting them home.

Donate to Aid to the Church in Need:

Visit www.churchinneed.org.

Donate to the Knights of Columbus rebuilding efforts: Visit www.kofc.org/en/charities/christian-relief.



The town of Karamdes, seen from the top of Santa Barbara Church, used by ISIS snipers during their occupation.

The Nineveh Plains Reconstruction Project

After the Islamic State (ISIS) was driven out of the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq in 2017, the scale of destruction left behind in a chain of historically Christian villages was staggering.

- 1,233 Christian houses totally destroyed
- 3,502 Christian houses burnt
- 8,217 Christian houses partially damaged
- 34 Church properties wiped out
- 132 Church properties burnt
- 197 Church properties damaged in some way

To rebuild the Christian presence here meant that more than 13,000 structures would have to be restored in whole or part. Doing precisely that is the ambitious aim of the "Nineveh Plains Reconstruction Project," a joint effort of three Christian churches here with the backing of Catholic organizations such as the papal foundation Aid to the Church in Need and the Knights of Columbus, as well as other actors such as the government of Hungary.

This article by John Allen for Crux has been reprinted and adapted with permission by Chris Ruff, Director of the Office for Ministries and Social Concerns. For the complete series of articles, visit www.cruxnow.com.