

Coexisting with Saddam: Iraqi Christians fear war, decry sanctions

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

The numbers of Christians living in Iraq, mostly Catholic and Orthodox, have been dwindling for more than two decades. One exodus of Christians began during the prolonged Iran-Iraq war that stretched from 1979 to '88. The short, violent gulf war of 1991 was followed by 11 years of United Nations economic sanctions, which church leaders say have made life miserable and survival tenuous for many. Christians, once a notable minority in a land where according to tradition the apostles Peter, Thomas and Thaddeus planted the seeds of the gospel, constitute about 5 percent of the nation's population, said a Catholic source.

Church officials in Iraq and U.S.-based church relief workers are quick to say that they are not the victims of persecution by the regime of Saddam Hussein. Early in the recent exodus, "many Christians were middle class professionals who had skills to find employment outside the country," said David Weaver, former Church World Service director for the Middle East. Many of those remaining do not have the family ties or skills that would enable them to leave, reports indicate.

Iraqi clergy who spoke to an ecumenical conference in Beirut in May emphasized that the notion churches are persecuted in Iraq is unfounded. Though individual Christians may suffer attacks by non-Christian Iraqis who accuse them (wrongly) as siding with the United States, the official government policy is tolerance toward minority faiths, they said. Indeed, the government occasionally appears to curry favor with ethnic and religious groups.

"We heard a number of stories about the government providing building costs, utility payments for churches, even a pipe organ donated by Hussein," said Daryl Byler, director of the Mennonite Central Committee's Washington, D.C., office, who visited three Iraqi church communities last May. "The handouts appear to be one way of

keeping people happy, with some level of control,” said Byler. The MCC coordinates relief and development in 60 countries.

Indeed, the Iraqi president recently launched the construction of a new temple in Baghdad for the Sabaeans. Also called Mandeans, they are the lone remnant of Gnosticism, a competitor to early Christianity fought by the church as a heresy. But a high-ranking cleric in Baghdad, Sheik Khalaf Abu Zaydoon, said its practices today show Islamic influence, except for emphasizing baptism in worship in honor of John the Baptist as a prophet. The Sabaean General Affairs Council credited Hussein for a 50 million dinar donation to their magazine, *Mandean Horizons*, reported Religion News Service in September.

The Mennonite delegation visited the Protestant Evangelical Church of Baghdad, a Syrian Orthodox church and a Chaldean Catholic church. “It is clear that they are not free to win new converts to the faith, but they spoke uniformly of having the freedom to worship,” Byler said. “They all raised the issue of sanctions with us.”

The elders at the 400-family evangelical church told the visitors that they have had trouble paying the pastor a full salary. The likelihood of war, evident even last May, added to their sense of foreboding, Byler said. The handful of Protestant churches in Iraq often use the label “evangelical”; they tend to be Presbyterian (or Reformed) in tradition, according to the Middle East Reformed Fellowship.

Five Presbyterian churches in Iraq have registered as the Presbyterian National General Assembly, according to a booklet on Iraq updated by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Several PCUSA delegations have made solidarity visits to churches there. In the booklet, Mike Nahal, relief coordinator of the Middle East Council of Churches, told of a Christian named Shawki, a trained nurse with a family, who lost his job in a hospital in Mosul, an Iraq city in the north where much of the Christian population lives.

“I met Shawki at a church gathering in Baghdad,” wrote Nahal. “He looked fragile . . . and he was avoiding people. The scanty support he gets from the church is barely enough to keep him and his family alive.”

The same kind of story is told by members of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch. “Our church used to be one of the richest in the country,” said Archbishop Cyril Aphrem Karim of Teaneck, New Jersey, the patriarchal vicar for the eastern United States, who visited Iraq two years ago. “But the sanctions forced us to develop

welfare programs for our people.” The 40,000 or so church members in Iraq “are very worried” about the threat of war, said Karim, who was in Damascus, Syria, in September for a synod meeting.

Both Karim’s Orthodox church and the largest Christian group in Iraq, the Chaldean Catholics, an Eastern church with ties to Rome, are critical of the sanctions and have joined the ecumenical outcry against a possible preemptive attack by the U.S. and England against Iraq. Karim, for instance, signed the letter by U.S., British, Canadian and Australian church leaders at the World Council of Churches’ Central Committee meeting in Geneva who objected to the war threats. “We share the concern over civilian casualties at the same time that we worry about the use of weapons of mass destruction,” said Karim.

Chaldean Bishop Ibrahim N. Ibrahim of Southfield, Michigan, who heads the eastern U.S. eparchy, or diocese, is on the U.S. Catholic bishops’ International Policy Committee, which worked on the message to the White House in September asking President Bush to “step back from the brink of war.” Chaldean Catholics “are against any war,” Ibrahim said, but they are “very worried about the destiny of people in Iraq—Muslims or Christians.”

Asked about reports in February by the Chaldean News Agency that the Iraqi government had instituted “repressive” measures against Christians, both Ibrahim and Karim said that the most serious decree, while still on the books, has not been applied in practice. That decree places all Christian clergy and churches in Iraq under the control of the Ministry of Islamic Property, known in Arabic as “Awqaf.”

Chaldean and Orthodox representatives in Baghdad who met with government officials were told that the decree was meant to “protect” the churches from harassment, said Karim. “The decree is still imposed, but the churches are independent and free to run themselves,” said the Orthodox archbishop. “Like all countries in the Middle East, there is no democracy,” added Ibrahim in a separate interview. “But in general [churches have] a good relationship in Iraq—they try to be very diplomatic.”

Similar perspectives were voiced at the conference five months ago in Beirut, cosponsored by Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding and the Middle East Council of Churches. An Iraqi Presbyterian pastor from Kirkuk, Halthem Jazrawi, and three bishops from Baghdad said in a panel discussion that the sanctions have cost

tens of thousands of lives by cutting off access to medicine and proper nutrition.

“Our churches in Iraq are hungry, thirsty, naked. . . . The Lord will ask you about this on the Day of Judgment,” warned Chaldean Bishop Shlimon Wardouni, as reported by the EMEU journal. Similarly, Avac Asadourian, Armenian Apostolic bishop of Baghdad, said, “There are some who claim that the sanctions are a potential instrument for peace. I say otherwise: sanctions remain a sinful act that must be expiated like any other sin.”