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A WOUNDED MEMORY – THE CHURCH IN IRAQ TODAY

Ara Badalian

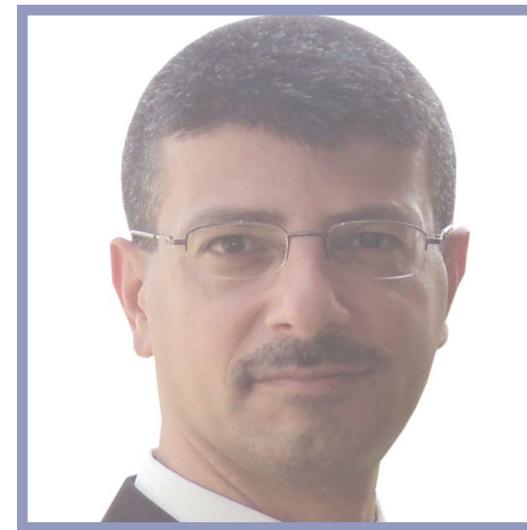
SCHOLAR LEADER
INSIGHTS

Dear friends of the church,

A distinction of Majority World Christianity is that it is often (although definitely not always) a minority movement subject to some level of persecution by the majority. Nowhere is that more evident than in modern Iraq, the home of Ara Badalian. We have watched the terror of ISIS from afar. The church he leads reaches out to refugees, Christians and Muslims, displaced by this terrorist group.

As has been the case from the first century, persecution leads the persecuted to reflect on whether to flee and live, or to remain and face opposition. That choice is never clear cut. Without judging those who flee, Ara comments on the value of staying. Let us join him in concern for all Iraqis, including the church. And please intercede for Ara, for the faithful who decide to leave, and for those who remain.

Larry Smith
President



A Wounded Memory

The Iraqi people have experienced a deep wound. Since 2003, national unity has been torn apart, creating an irreparable fissure in what was probably a superficial unity within the country. After 2003, Iraq developed a system that consolidated democracy along sectarian, religious, and ethnic lines, deepening fragmentation and benefitting only the ruling elite. The system has taken a particular toll on minorities in Iraq. As vulnerable and numerically small communities in our society, they cannot defend themselves nor their rights. Their voices are drowned by those of violence, murder, and death from the belligerent majority groups within their own nation. For Iraq's Christians, this has led to the recent state of persecution.

The Historical Memory of a Region

The landscape of the Middle East may have changed permanently on June 10, 2014, when the city of Mosul (site of the historic city of Nineveh) came under ISIS control, forcing minority groups to flee. Many, including the Christians, may never return to a place they have called home for centuries. Mosul's historic legacy dates back thousands of years as the location of the ancient Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs. The early church took root there as well. During World War I, Christian Armenians fled to northern Iraq, seeking a safe and stable place to start a new life. Violence during the 20th century, including that of the Republican Era against the Kurds, led to internal displacement for many minority groups, including Christians, who found their way to major cities like Baghdad and Mosul. The first Gulf War catalyzed further displacement and initiated a wave of emigration to the West.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 brought much rejoicing, especially for those who had previously lost their villages in the Nineveh Plain. Many returned to inhabit the land vacated by the previous generation. Like a magnet, the area drew Christians seeking an escape from the sectarian violence that spread across Iraq from 2006-2008. In this Christian stronghold, many families sought a better tomorrow as their nation was falling apart.

However, on June 10, this Christian area finally succumbed to the control of the worst fanatical Muslim movement ever. Christians received only a very short notice that they must choose: convert to Islam, pay an exorbitant ransom, depart the region, or die. Many chose to leave

everything behind. They departed, carrying only their faith in Jesus Christ, the glory of their great history, and the wounded memory of what it has meant to be a Christian in modern Iraq.

The Current Situation and the Response of the Church

Over the last decade, many Christians have moved to the West because they have lost not only their property, but also any hope of rebuilding a better life in their homeland. Since 2003, the number of Christians in Iraq has eroded steadily from more than 1.5 million to estimates of fewer than 300,000 today. These emigrants seek an alternative homeland where they can live in security and pursue a new dream of a better life. In addition, internal migration has left churches in historic areas empty as their sons and daughters abandon their houses in pursuit of physical safety in places like Baghdad, which lie outside fanatical control. Hundreds of thousands of refugees (Christian, Muslim, and others) have needs that stretch the limits of a declining church population.

However, in the midst of this migration, the Church continues to call its people to remain. We need a Christian presence in Iraq. There may even be a need for martyrdom in the midst of the challenges faced by Christianity now, as there has been in this part of the world in previous generations.

The Hope of the Redeemed

The Church is not surprised by what has happened. The Lord Jesus tells us we will be persecuted (John 15:20). We are called to address the spiritual and practical needs of

others even in the midst of our own loss. We are called to confront the power of injustice, abuse, and murder through the power of the cross (Romans 5:8). This is not an easy task in the face of persecution. Yet, we have the opportunity to respond as those redeemed by Christ. Joining across denominational lines and, at times, across religious and political sectors.



Seven ways the church in Iraq can take action:

- Intensify our united efforts to raise awareness of spiritual and practical needs within our country.
- Provide systematic and organized contributions to help displaced persons across Iraq.
- Participate actively in both international and national efforts to help refugees within our country.
- Take the lead in working with those in power to provide a place for a Christian presence in our homeland.
- Advocate for the role of minorities as true citizens of Iraq. We should fight for the rights and privileges of all minorities so

that we might not disappear from our homeland.

- Courageously act in the midst of the understandable appeal of emigration. We must take into account the real dangers faced and the feelings of those who desire to emigrate, not shaming them to stay. However, we must at the same time work to create safe areas, opportunities for work, and the hope that they may again own their own land, maintaining their heritage and traditions.
- Overcome extremism by working with religious and Islamic authorities and others to promote the equitable treatment of all religions.

The people of Iraq have experienced a deep wound and face ongoing intense persecution. The events of this past summer, symbolized by the fall of Mosul and the edict against Christians, have forged a deep rift between Islam and the rest of the minority groups in Iraq. Identity and unity have been replaced with fear, sometimes felt even in our daily interactions. However, we are not without hope. The church's call to counter injustice and confront the gates of hell still rings true. We will triumph over evil through Christ, our Victor, who triumphed over death.

Ara Badalian serves as the Pastor of the Baptist Church of Baghdad. He is also an adjunct faculty member at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon. ScholarLeaders supports Ara for his PhD studies through Asian Graduate School of Theology, where his research addresses the interaction between Eastern Christians and Muslims in Iraq during the early years of Islam.