

The Church in One Small Corner of Post-War Iraq

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The specifics in this article are purposely vague for security reasons.*

Picture a baby attempting to stand for the first time: unsure and wobbly, feet a little unsteady and hands clenched firmly to its mother's fingers, it strains to rise. Slowly, with much effort and concentration, knees straighten and an amazed infant beams a smile of accomplishment at the realisation that it's standing on two feet. Remaining upright is quite another thing. It flops back to the ground with a thud, returning to what it knows best, crawling or being carried. It is too soon to think about walking...or is it?

This is how I would describe the church in the small corner of Iraq where I have had the privilege to come and go over the last six years. This is a picture not of the Orthodox Church which has been present in Iraq for centuries: Orthodox Christians account for approximately three percent of Iraq's population. In recent days it is these Christians that have mostly made news in the press having been persecuted from Basra to Mosul. They need our prayers and our practical support as many have lost homes and possessions. However, this is not the church I speak of. I speak about a church comprised of mainly new believers who have been converted from the Muslim faith.

Standing... A Nice Idea

As a child develops, curiosity grows, and this provides the motivation to attempt to stand and reach for what is out of bounds. But the child soon learns that standing takes effort, concentration and perseverance and this is true for believers in Iraq.

About a year before the war there were a sizable group of men who met regularly for prayer and worship in our city. One by one many have drifted away. After the war a local brother went to ask some of the men why they had stopped coming to the meetings. With foreign involvement in the church many thought that there was financial gain to be had, or a foreign wife and visa out of the country. When this turned out not to be true many lost interest. For others it was just too difficult to stand up against family pressure. There have been many attracted to Jesus because of disillusionment with Islam and perhaps because Christianity is perceived to be western and many aspire to be the 'modern' image associated with it. A local brother shared that this was a sifting time from the Lord. I think he was right, as those that have continued to follow Jesus are growing in their faith and are wanting to stand.

Time to Stand

It is the normal development of a child that the time will come when they must stand up. If it does not, there is some problem. To stand is the first step in taking responsibility and using the gifts you have been endowed with. Since the war, there seems to be an increased interest in Christian things. Many have returned from the West; some having encountered Christians, but there is no visible church to attend here, except the Orthodox one, where Christians are fearful and often suspicious of new people.

For believers from a Muslim background to stand up and be counted will be costly. Perhaps before they can make this stand they need to learn how to be a member of their new family – the church. People in this part of the world are part of a family unit, extended family and then wider community. This is either in a district of a city or within a village community. These family ties are far stronger social networks than in the west, as control is exercised from older members of the family over younger ones. A person's whole sense of identity and security is bound into this, even if the control is stifling. To be bold enough to say you have become a Christian will often mean alienation from family and community. Here the small group of Christ's followers is struggling to work out what it means to live as a community of His people, to love brothers and sisters with whom they are now one in Christ.

Letting Go

As a child holds the hand of its mother in an attempt to stand up, so the mother must learn to give the right amount of support. Too much support and the child will never learn to take those first steps. Inevitably, a child learning to walk will fall – it's all part of the learning process. Words of encouragement will give the confidence that is needed to try again.

The role of internationals in this place has been both positive and negative. They have provided teaching and the means to produce Christian literature which is culturally relevant. This is significant help needed, much beyond the financial means of a local indigenous fellowship. Church partnerships have also been established with other Middle Eastern countries which are providing far more culturally sensitive and relevant applied Biblical teaching than those of Western origin.

On a more negative note expatriates bring money, and money attracts but can also make people dependent. If the local believers are to learn how to be a community, they need to share their resources with each other. If they always look to those outside the country, it is hard to see how true fellowship will develop.

There is another danger with excessive amounts of money – control. A person does not bite the hand of those that feed them. A good parent teaches their children to manage money by the giving of pocket money; when amounts are gradually increased in line with the child's maturity the child will have the opportunity to make increasingly important choices. However, when a child is given large amounts it is often the parents who will then direct as to how best it should be spent. All the time local believers are being paid to do spiritual acts of service within the fellowship with funds from outside the country it is difficult to see how the church will be able to hear God's voice to direct their path if that path is different to the agenda of the outside sponsor.

Attempting to Walk

When a child begins to walk, it usually has a destination in mind. This is either towards an affirming parent or towards some item which has captivated its imagination, such as a new shiny toy. Both of these provide a challenge: will it be possible for Christians to resist the temptation of being drawn into the increasing materialism of the nation as it inevitably grows in wealth from its oil reserves and other natural resources? As more shops open following the lifting of trade sanctions, there is a real danger that the social pressure to have the latest item will cause people to fall into the debt trap. There has been a huge shift in attitudes since the war. The accumulation of wealth and the individual pursuit of it as an endpoint is prevalent. Before the war people generally were united in their struggle against the

hardships of an oppressive regime. There was a community spirit of helping one another, because all had suffered under the former regime. This has sadly disappeared. The UN's presence here has developed a people very happy to receive from outside, indeed they feel it is almost their right because they have suffered. Compassion is a word often spoken but rarely practiced. Yet there are many in need. A negative result of the European and American influences among the believers is individualism: this trend in society is sadly influencing the church.

The second challenge is the role the parent plays. We touched on this earlier when thinking on the role of the international, but there is also local indigenous leadership. Role models for leadership in Iraq have not been good and the challenge for anyone here with aspirations for leadership is whether or not they become the 'kingpin'. To resist being a mini dictator is a real challenge: because people have been so used to this style of leadership, it has become the norm in both church and society. There are, locally, those with real vision, but when leadership is ordained from outside the country and foreign money pays the leader, the power seems to be a corrupting rather than enabling power which goes to peoples' heads.

The most urgent need of the young church now is to have servant leaders, so that when they start to walk they will have good models to follow. To walk inevitably means to get up and walk away from something. The challenge of the church is to walk in a biblical culture: something that is certainly not synonymous with western culture.

Being a Good Parent

For a mother or father to be able to step back and let their child grow, they have to work on being good parents. For all internationals working in this place the time has come for them to stop trying to build churches that are 'theirs', and learn to belong to a church. Unity is something that has to be worked at: since the beginning of the year three significant events have happened to bring people together, across mission agencies, across denominations, across nationality. There has never been more active co-operation and fellowship between people, but there is still much work to be done, and the unity is fragile. Standing as an international community and making ourselves available to other international workers who have come for secular work is a new challenge and yet a vital one. The local community of believers needs to see examples of community in practice: how will our local brothers and sisters learn what it is to live in harmony, being part of a body and a family, if the internationals here behave as if they were divorced parents following their own agendas, living separate lives and not wanting to be together?

Trusting Our Heavenly Father

I have used the analogy of a parent helping a child to walk throughout this article and am painfully aware of how inadequate it is. For the true parent in this work is our Heavenly Father. It is after all His Church and I am confident that, in spite of all the challenges facing the church here, and only a few have been mentioned, He is building his Church in this place.

One international friend, who has worked here many years, commented that this is a nation of orphans, needing a father. It is rather arrogant I feel to have suggested that international workers here are the 'parents', because on the whole I am not sure of how much we now help the church. Just the other day I heard a report that in one town, where there has been no international involvement, there are now over one hundred believers.

The greatest challenge for us all in the next few years will be for internationals to trust the work to our Heavenly Father. We will need to step back and wait to be asked for help. We then need to be wise in the way we give biblical teaching, so as not to pass on western church traditions, and in the way financial assistance is given. For God is working, so please keep praying for the believers in this place that they may grow in unity, boldness, wisdom and God's love.

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