

Loss and trauma: Churches help Iraqi Christians displaced by Islamic State

ANKAWA, Iraq (CNS) – Walking through this mainly Christian town outside of Irbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, it's easy to see many changes since the victims of Islamic State militants fled here for safety seven years ago.

Gone are the tents and caravans that dotted church yards and open fields to house those escaping forced conversion to Islam or death at the hands of the Islamic State militants in 2014. Colorful laundry once hung from balconies, while some people slept on church pews.

The cavernous concrete skeleton of a shopping mall then sheltered 2,500 displaced people. Support from Catholic and other churches built and cordoned off rooms on three-stories; each room housed a single family, and all shared basic cooking and bathroom facilities.

The unfinished structure has given way to the Ankawa Mall, where people can food shop at the French Carrefour supermarket, eat in a Turkish restaurant or buy Hello Kitty accessories at a Japanese import shop.

In 2017, the Iraqi military and U.S.-led coalition troops forced out Islamic State fighters. Since then, Catholic churches and organizations have been working hard to address challenges faced by Iraq's historic Christian community and other religious minorities.

"People have faced tremendous difficulties and wounding by the Islamic State. We are still experiencing the practical effects of loss and trauma," said Fadi, an Armenian Christian worshipping at a local church.

Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil stewarded the building of four schools, a university and a hospital, providing local people with badly needed employment, with assistance from Stephen Rasche, who is counsel to the Chaldean Archdiocese of Erbil.

“We cannot surrender to the argument that religion is a source of violence. Our Lord is there for all. As his followers we need to make that clear and lead the way with education,” Archbishop Warda told Catholic News Service.

Celebrating its first graduating class in October, the Catholic University in Erbil initially opened its doors in 2015 when Islamic State militants carried out a genocide against Iraq’s religious and ethnic minorities. Rasche, who is also the university’s vice chancellor, told CNS that the initial course offering develops practical skills needed in Iraq such as business administration, IT, finance and accounting.

Speaking at the graduation ceremony, in which Christian and Muslim students participated, Cardinal Louis Sako said “the Catholic Church has distinguished itself since the first centuries of its founding for its cultural and social institutions: schools, universities, charities for the poor, hospitals and charitable clinics.”

Cardinal Sako, who is also Iraq’s Chaldean Catholic patriarch, expressed hope that “religious education” is offered to all students, not only Christian or Muslim, but will embrace different faiths so that students “can know the points in common and avoid extremism.”

Father Emanuel Youkhana, who runs the Christian Aid Program Northern Iraq (CAPNI), a Christian program for displaced Iraqis around the northern city of Dahuk, said his organization provides instruction on Eastern Christianity.

“It’s a matter of Eastern Christian identity, which for the

past 2,000 years has been rooted in Iraq," he told CNS of the need to ground people. "We are focusing on two parallel lines. One is capacity building of the church through catechism, Bible studies, liturgical courses, and summer classes. We work in Dahuk, Ankawa, Kirkuk, and (the) Ninevah Plain with more than 24 parishes involved."

"We are also working on Syriac promotion, which is the mother language of the Eastern church. We have 2,000 years of Syriac literature, theology and archival material," said Father Youkhana, a priest, or archimandrite, of the Assyrian Church of the East.

"Often, we only deal with the outcome and the consequences of the catastrophe such as health, infrastructure, livelihood needs, but we must still address the roots of the problem. And we are focusing more and more on this," to tackle the ideology behind the Islamic State tragedy, Father Youkhana explained.

He said CAPNI has worked to revise the curriculum in social science and history books for government schools in grades 1 to 9 throughout the Kurdish region to include Iraq's ethno-religious diversity.

"People will graduate with a positive knowledge about Yazidis, about Christians. It is part of their history. If you don't know the other, how do you respect them or feel solidarity with them?" Father Youkhana said.

CAPNI is also operating five children's centers, each with 150 children, ages 6-13, from different religious backgrounds. They are given "informal education, not just math or languages but arts, sports ... environmental awareness, like how to keep the area clean, etc."

"We are encouraging Yazidi children to celebrate religious holidays with Muslims and vice versa," he added.

In Ankawa, the Chaldean Archdiocese of Irbil also opened the

Maryamana Hospital, with staff from Christian and Muslim backgrounds. A recent visit to the hospital saw a Shiite cleric enter the facility to pay his respects.

“The hospital is open to all,” Rasche told CNS, adding that the Catholic Church also provided health clinics to aid people during the 2014-2017 conflict against Islamic State.

Cardinal Sako called the social, cultural, education and health initiatives undertaken by the Catholic Church a way to “prepare for a future of coexistence” in Iraq, while offering opportunities for an exchange of experiences and knowledge in anticipation of challenges that lie ahead.