

Christian Communities need our prayers

Stewart Hemsley (Chair of Pax Christi) accompanied a delegation from N. Iraq to Brussels in June concerned about the plight of Christian communities.

Issues the delegation raised included the fear of losing their identity if forced to leave Iraq. Many families are leaving and as a result are divided. Kidnapping of children is an ever-present danger. In schools administered by the Christian community, but that are also under central authority, the teaching of Christianity is forbidden unless more than 50% of pupils are Christian. However, if there is one Muslim pupil in a school the law says that Islamic teaching is to take place. Christian schools are regularly attacked and bombed. Six kindergarten schools each with some 50 children are having to close whilst others are under attack. After a first communion celebration children were involved in an attack resulting in them being holed up for three days. There is a chronic shortage of play equipment and materials for children. The delegation felt that intervention by those countries involved with Iraq was needed and that the Iraqi government needs to be put under pressure and questioned about its inactivity with regard to protecting human rights.

Points made by the delegation were that there are three minority groups, of which the Christians are one, which have no representation in the Iraqi Parliament. This

contrasts poorly with the situation under Saddam Hussein (SH) when they were represented. The distribution of power post SH has resulted in the exclusion of minority rights in both the civil and military sectors of society, again a contrast with the situation under SH. After the fall of SH the Christian community did not make any initial demands as they felt it was important to win trust. The situation now however is that the Christian community is being approached by radical and terrorist groups to join them. That they don't means their position is further demeaned. As a result of this some of the community have had to move from the area in which they live to avoid danger. The delegation also said that they have had 16 of their leaders killed. Dr. Yousef Hanna Ibrahim, Mosul deputy governor, related how he has a bodyguard of 10 men and how one of them, a policeman, was kidnapped, had his hands cut off, and then because he was a Christian crucified. 'We hoped for better (after Saddam Hussein) but it became worse' they said. Over 9,000 refugees have been assimilated from Baghdad. Christians are discriminated against at every level. Legislation needs to be enforced by the Iraqi government who express good intentions but do nothing. The infrastructure needed by

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the Christian community to act/live is absent. 'Our concern' they said, 'is not political but humanitarian.' A sad note was the comment 'We lose hope.'

When asked about the future and what they were asking the UK & EU for specifically, they replied that employment was needed, a political future, a guaranteed Federal system, a proper legal standing guaranteed, preservation of dignity, their own regional budget so that they are not left to the mercy of the central Iraqi government, one united Iraq with minority rights guaranteed, a reformed constitution, and reform of laws that discriminate against the Christian community. They added that their community is being undermined by infiltration.

At the European Commission the delegation was seen by Karin Gatt-Rutter of the Iraq Desk.

As well as the issues referred to the one of kidnapping and murder was raised along with unjust demands for a 'Religious tax' levied for 'protection.' The delegation spoke of corrupt government officials, land and homes confiscated which aggravate the unemployment situation and of children being forced to convert to Islam by pressurising parents. The children cannot convert back to Christianity when they become of age. The Commission raised the question of the rights of women – almost a sick joke!

At the European Parliament Emma Nicholson was unavailable but the delegation saw Nickolay E. Mladenov MEP and Jana Hybaskova MEP both on the committee for Israel/Iraq. Issues already referred to were raised. In reply the commissioners spoke of the common policy being sought by the EU toward Iraq which, they said, would be supported by all political groups who were already in agreement that Iraq must solve its own problems (a bit rich I thought, seeing as how we have created most of them!). The delegation was asked how they viewed the forthcoming autumn elections. They replied that they have little or no trust in the process having no representation.

Mention was made of the importance of the German Bishops who have a big influence on the Peoples Party in the EU having 280 votes in the EU Parliament and are the largest bloc and likely to be sympathetic to the issues raised by the delegation. This seemed to be the most hopeful feature of the visit.

These Christian communities need our prayers. ■

Centre Space



CEL Members Heike and Richard Podger run Centre Space a small retreat house, and would always welcome CEL members. They write, 'Struggle and Contemplation' are the components of life in the words of Roger Schutz (Taize). Life consists of both engagement and withdrawal, tension and relaxation, giving out and taking in. The tendency with many of us though, is that we have too much of the first and not enough of the second. While it is wonderful that there are so many purposeful and necessary things to do, many of which bring fulfillment, all of us are in real danger of becoming unbalanced and losing a sense of our real centre.

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