



By FRANKLIN PYLES ✶



In spite of war and terrorism, the Christian church in Iraq is thriving and reaching out to fellow countrymen. The new church in Baghdad is the culmination of missionary efforts, resources and especially prayer.

I was privileged to visit that city last fall to attend an outdoor ordination service for Ghassan Thomas, an Alliance pastor. Rev. Yousef Hashweh, president of the C&MA in Jordan, and Rev. Sami Dagher, representative for the C&MA in Lebanon, also attended.

Though Presbyterians brought the gospel to Baghdad and founded churches in the late '30s and early '40s, the congregations were not allowed to flourish under Saddam Hussein's regime. One pastor said that he would receive phone calls from government officials who would say, "This weekend is such and such, a Muslim holiday; you are to preach about this."

Here I Am

Alliance work in Lebanon at that time seemed to have come to a standstill. Then a man named Sami Dagher and his wife, Joy, came to our missionaries seeking God. The Daghers were disciplined, and a number of churches sprung up from their ministry. They held revival services in Lebanon, and eventually the Lebanese church started sending Pastor Dagher to Baghdad for preaching missions.

*A celebration that
was the result of the
spreading flame of
the gospel*

Light *in* Baghdad

At one service a young couple who had found Christ came forward and said they wanted to enter the ministry. The man was Ghassan Thomas, who would become pastor of the C&MA church in Baghdad.

After being trained at the Alliance Institute in Beirut, the Thomases returned to Baghdad and began a nursery school and a cell church. Later they rented a building for what was to become the Alliance church.

Hussein's rule in Baghdad ended in early 2003, and people began to attend the Alliance church, first in dozens and then in hundreds. A large sign on the church roof reads: "Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, Baghdad: Jesus Christ, the Light of the World." This elicited a response from the Muslim majority, but they agreed that the church was helping people and that it was from the people. Therefore, the congregation was left in peace. For this we praise God.

Vital Connection

While we were in Baghdad for the ordination service, Hashweh initiated a meeting for the evangelical pastors of the city Dagher and

The giant illuminated cross dominates the skyline. The sign reads: "Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, Baghdad: Jesus Christ, the Light of the World" (far left). Franklin Pyles and Sami Dagher welcomed Muslim clerics to the outdoor ordination service (right).

The evening service drew more than 900 to the church property for worship, praise and Ghassan Thomas' ordination (far right).



Photos courtesy of Samaritan's Purse



I also attended. The pastors laid a foundation for connection that evening. They realized the potential to act together and talked of unified action in speaking of Christ in Baghdad. They even discussed the possibility of forming an evangelical synod for the city.

This unplanned meeting seemed to give Dagher and Hashweh hope for a dream come true. I was immensely encouraged and realized two things.

First, bringing church leaders together for unified gospel work is part of our historic mission as Alliance pastors. Dr. A. B. Simpson brought together the pastors of Louisville, Kentucky, who were divided because of the Civil War—pastors who had, no doubt, accused and hurt each other. But Simpson persuaded them to put their



More than 40 men and women asked to be baptized during the church's celebration weekend (above right).

Iraqi children praise God at church opening celebrations (above and right).





Franklin Pyles joined other Christian leaders in ordaining the Baghdad church's first pastor, Ghassan Thomas (left).

differences in the past and work together to bring Christ to their city.


During my time in Baghdad, I was freshly challenged to think of and pray continually about how to work with other churches in outreach and ministry.

Second, I learned again how God is at work in our world. As we consider the borders that have been drawn by men—drawn and then enforced with fire and steel—let us also consider how futile those barriers are in keeping out God. He is moving, calling His people together, drawing hearts to Himself. I am stirred with passion to be even more involved in Christ's great work in this day of challenge.

Set Apart

Representatives from a number of churches—not only Protestant but also Roman Catholic, Chaldean Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox as well as some Muslims—attended the ordination. More than 900 people attended, and the celebration continued the following night with more than 40 baptisms. The presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit were evident.

Christ was sent to us by the Father for our salvation, and He said: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). We are passionately committed to being sent, to planting and maturing churches across the world and seeing them in turn hearing Christ's call to go and preach the gospel in other cultures. The Baghdad story tells us that year by year the truth-giving, life-giving stream of the gospel is flowing wider and wider to thirsty hearts.

Join with me in praise to our gracious God who so loved the world that He sent His unique Son and in thanksgiving that He has called you to a church that continues to be part of that loving mission. 



Dr. Franklin Pyles is president of the C&MA in Canada.



Baptismal candidates formed a unique praise and worship group for the outdoor service.