

SYRIA:

CHURCH IN CRISIS

Facing war, poverty and persecution, many Christians have left Syria.
So what future is faced by those who remain?

Words and photos: Chris Ray

The brightly painted banner strung across the street portrays a confident young soldier in camouflage uniform carrying an assault rifle. In the background is a depiction of the crucified Christ, seemingly shrouded in Syria's two-starred tricolour flag.

The young man's name was Issa. Though he fought and died in President Bashar al-Assad's secular army, the banner put up by Issa's family commemorates him as a 'martyr' for God as well as country.

Pastor Samir Yacco of the Baptist Evangelical Church walks beneath Issa's makeshift memorial as he makes the rounds of his parish in Dweila, a poor, predominately Christian neighbourhood in south-east Damascus.

Other reminders of the war are all around him: the charred shell of a car hit by a rebel mortar round; the frequent thump of artillery aimed at nearby rebel enclaves; the dozens of conflict refugees – Christian and Muslim, men and women – who accost him to plead for food parcels.

For the past decade, Dweila has given



sanctuary and aid to Christians escaping persecution in Iraq. Its Christian population of about 1.4 million has more than halved since the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein, estimates the Catholic international charity Aid to the Church in Need.

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FLEEING PERSECUTION

Now thousands of Syrian Christians have been added to Dweila's homeless and destitute. Many have fled oppression by hard-line Islamists who increasingly dominate the ranks of rebel fighters and their foreign allies. Only a small minority of rebels is still attached to secular groups, according to analysts such as the intelligence consultancy IHS Jane's.

Persecution of Christians seems relentless and worsening – a grim catalogue of religiously motivated kidnappings, torture and murder. A recent report by Aid to the Church in Need describes Christians under extreme pressure to convert to Islam, churches desecrated and burnt, and the abduction and rape of Christian girls. The report records the especially poignant case of Father Fadi Jamil Haddad of the Greek Orthodox Church. The 44-year-old married

priest was abducted near Damascus in October 2012 after going to negotiate the release of a parishioner – a doctor kidnapped a few days earlier. After a brief disappearance, Father Haddad was found dead with his eyes gouged out. The doctor he risked his life to save was a Muslim.

During Father Haddad's funeral service, attended by thousands, a bomb exploded killing two mourners and several soldiers.

Christians make up between seven and 10% of Syria's 22.5 million people. The precise number is impossible to know

because Syrian administration does not record religious affiliation. They live among a Sunni Muslim majority and other minorities such as Alawis, Shia, Ismailis, Druze and Yezidis.

'Syria has the most complex religious geography in the Middle East,' says Australian Anglican Rev Andrew Lake, who served as a minister in Damascus and Aleppo, Syria's biggest city, for almost two years until late 2011. Egypt essentially has one stream of Orthodox



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Christianity – Coptic, whereas Syria has four – Greek, Armenian, Syrian and Chaldean, plus Catholic versions of each of these, alongside Maronites and Protestant denominations. Syrian Christianity is ethnically mixed, and includes native Arab, Armenian and

Aramaic speakers.

After living alongside Muslims for 14 centuries, Syria's ancient Christian minority now has good reason to believe they confront an existential threat. As Yacco puts it: 'Our existence as a faith is threatened by a fanatical doctrine.'

He is quick to add

that all religious communities are suffering. 'People from all religions come to us for help and we respond to them equally in the way our faith obliges us to,' he says.

Many of Dweila's refugees come from the industrial city of Homs. At least 50,000 inhabitants – almost its entire Christian population – had fled violence and persecution by early 2012, according to Aid to the Church in Need. It said extremist members of the Faruq Brigade – part of the Free



Syrian Army – went door to door targeting Christian homes as part of what one cleric called a deliberate plan to isolate, cut off and destroy Christian communities.

Yacco's own modest church on the ground floor of an apartment block bears the scars of a mortar strike. Yet he is adamant his parishioners will not be forced out of Dweila. 'When we lose souls we grieve, but we will hold on to this land we were born in.'

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CHRISTMAS SADNESS

A similar tone of determination – even defiance – pervaded Christmas celebrations throughout the capital. It was Syria's third Christmas at war. Along with Easter, it remains a national holiday. Unlike most Arab states, Syria does not recognise Islam as the state religion and there are signs of religious tolerance.

At St Mary's Greek Orthodox cathedral, the spiritual leader of Sunni Islam, Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, joins Patriarch John X Yazigi for joint prayers on Christmas Day. The war has brought personal tragedy to both men. Hassoun's 22-year-old student son was murdered after his father ignored demands to stop preaching against the armed rebellion and leave the country. Yazigi's brother Paul, the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo, is still unaccounted for after being kidnapped along with a bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church in April 2013.

State-run television gave extensive coverage of government leaders attending church services (including President al-Assad). Also at church on Christmas day was minister for culture Dr Loubana Moushaweh. 'I am a Muslim brought up in a school run by Catholic nuns who never treated me different from any other student,' she said. 'I cannot imagine Damascus without its church bells and mosques – we should cherish that

beautiful mixture.'

Even so, church bells have fallen silent in some rebel-occupied zones. In Raqqa, the only provincial capital wrested from government control, the al-Qaeda affiliate ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) is forcing its extreme interpretation of Islam upon the city's 1 million residents. It has closed and destroyed churches and held public Bible burnings, causing most of the city's 100,000 Christians to flee.

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FORCED CONVERSIONS

Even the biggest cities are not immune. Archbishop Jean-Clément Jeanbart of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church gave a compelling account of the perils facing Aleppo's Christians: 'As soon as they reached the city, Islamist guerrillas, almost all of them from abroad, took over the mosques. Every Friday, an imam launches their messages of hate, calling on the population to kill anyone who does not practise the religion of the Prophet Muhammad.'

Some Christians have had to endure the re-imposition of the *dhimma*, a previously discarded Islamic legal concept offering a degree of 'protection' to non-Muslim citizens while limiting their rights. Australian Anglican pastor Dr Mark Durie, a theologian, scholar of Islam and writer on Christian-Muslim relations, says Syrian Christians subject to the *dhimma* doctrine have been forced to make impossible choices.

'They are given the options of converting to Islam; paying a

heavy tax known as *jizya* for the privilege of keeping their heads and their Christian faith; being killed; or abandoning all their possession and fleeing,' says Durie. 'Some were killed, some fled, some tried to pay the *jizya* and found it too heavy a burden to bear after the rebels kept increasing the amount they had to pay, and some were unable to flee or pay, so they converted to Islam to save themselves.'

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KIDNAPPED PRIESTS

St Mary's Cathedral is in the old city of Damascus, just off the Roman-built thoroughfare referred to as the Street Called Straight in the biblical account of St Paul's conversion. There has been a church on the site since the second century and it has been the seat of the Greek Orthodox Church in the East for more than 600 years.



Inside the cathedral, Yazigi is talking about his negotiations with al-Qaeda. Three weeks before Christmas, armed men abducted 13 Greek Orthodox nuns and five orphanage workers. They were seized from the Mar Takla monastery at Maloula in the mountains 60 kilometres north of Damascus.

Yazigi says: 'One man, who was not even Syrian, claimed they took the nuns for their own protection. I said: "We would like you to complete the favour by bringing the nuns to us. I can come to you and pick them up if you want." He refused.

'Later the kidnappers had me on speaker phone. I was dealing with one person who seemed happy with what I was saying. Then someone else broke into the conversation and said: "Sir, you are not dealing with the Free Syrian Army, you are dealing with al-Qaeda." Then he hung up.'

The nuns' kidnapping seems to have been a joint operation between the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and a self-described brigade of the Free Syrian Army – a blanket term for disparate armed groups that receive Western aid. The kidnappers apparently want to swap the nuns for prisoners of the state, though the prospect of a ransom may also be a motivation.

Syrian churches have opened international channels to negotiate the release of nuns, bishops and other clerical hostages. Discussions are underway with US ally Qatar: the wealthy emirate is believed to be a major sponsor of Jabhat al-Nusra, even though the organisation is blacklisted by the US as a terrorist group.

The Lebanese Maronite Church has acted as a go-between with Qatar's ruler Sheikh Tammim al-Thani. Maronite archbishop Paul Sayah told the Catholic News Service he found it 'very strange and utterly unacceptable that no one has been able to locate the bishops and the priests after all this time, knowing that each one of the rebel factions is



Pastor Samir Yacco outside the Baptist Evangelical Church in Dweila

financed and presumably directed by one country or another.'

★ ★ SCHOOL ATTACKS

Just within the old city wall is the Armenian Orthodox Church of St Sarkis. There Bishop Armash Nalbandian takes from a cupboard the twisted tailpiece of a mortar shell that took the lives of four children at his church primary school on 11th November. The mortar hit the school bus as it was leaving the old city and the bus driver also died. An earlier rocket attack on the school killed a parishioner and injured several others in the churchyard.

A little boy has arrived late for a St Sarkis' church Christmas party. His mother explains that the boy is still frightened to get on a bus following the mortar attack. 'The loss of these children was very hard and very sad,' Nalbandian says. 'We closed the school for two weeks to allow time to try to comfort the children and families.'

November saw a wave of attacks on church schools and buses across Damascus forcing the Ministry of Education to temporarily suspend teaching at threatened schools. The Greek Orthodox Church's St John of Damascus School was also attacked on 11th November, injuring several

children. The next day two rockets hit the school bus. It was transporting teachers, two of whom were killed.

'There are groups determined to push Christians out of Syria,' says Nalbandian. But he stresses that Christians are not their only target: 'The terrorists target anyone who is not with them, who does not follow their ideology.'

★ ★ CHRISTIANS IN EXILE

It is not known how many Christians have fled Syria since the start of the conflict in early 2011. United Nations agencies cannot say because Christians in exile tend to avoid UN refugee camps where Islamic radicals may single them out for more victimisation. Syria's Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch, Gregorios III Laham, believes more than 450,000 of an estimated 1.75 million Syrian Christians have left the country. That would still make the Syrian Church the second largest in the Middle East after the Coptic Church in Egypt.

Nalbandian says Christians were a quarter of Syria's population 70 years ago but have dwindled to around 8%. The Armenian community, including descendants of Armenian refugees from the genocide in Ottoman Turkey during World War One, has crashed

from 300,000 to 110,000. ‘Christians across the Middle East face a similar situation. We are afraid for the future of Christians and the Christian presence in this region,’ he says.

★ ★ INTERVENTION

Nalbandian says Western churches have been slow to act on Syria. He blames the influence of a simplistic media narrative that presents the war as a conflict between ‘an evil regime and a goodwill opposition’.

Syria needs a strong functioning government to ensure public safety and stability, he says. ‘Whether we agree with that government or not is another question. Whether it is a government of Assad or someone else is another question – to be decided by Syrians, not foreigners.’

He says Syrian churches are encouraging dialogue between the Assad government and opposition figures pursuing peaceful reform. ‘The nature of the Church is oppositional, to demand all the time that the government uphold justice and freedom in society. There is a reform process underway and we are in this



process to make Syria a better country.

‘Syria is not the same as three or four years ago. People are no longer afraid to speak about the government. As churches we tell those responsible it is not right to bomb people, it’s not right to accept corruption, it’s not right to refuse to have any opposition.’

Nalbandian says stopping the violence is the top priority for Syria’s churches. ‘The government has to stop and so do the others. How can I start a dialogue with you when you have a gun and I have a gun? So when you in the West say you are going to help bring democracy and freedom to Syria, please don’t help these terrorist groups with weapons.’

★ ★ CRITICISM

Elements of the US Christian lobby, such as the Centre for Religious Freedom, have criticised the Obama administration for failing to address the particular plight of Syria’s Christians. The Center says Washington should take seriously charges by Syrian churches that the exiled Syrian National Coalition, backed by the West, ‘is dominated by Islamist groups and does not include authentic Christian voices.’

Durie also warns against Western policy towards Syria’s rebels. ‘It is a

matter of deep concern that European states and the US are assisting the Syrian rebels as they implement a so-called Islamic emirate,’ he says.

A lot more may be at stake in the fate of Syria’s Christians than the future of the Church itself. The Centre for Religious Freedom’s Nina Shea recently argued before a US congressional committee that the Middle East without Christians will become even more radicalised and more estranged from the West.

She quoted Lebanese Christian scholar Habib Malik’s assertion that Christian communities in the Middle East have often served to encourage Islamic openness and moderation, ‘creating an environment of pluralism that fosters acknowledgment of the different other’.

It’s a view shared by the Russian Orthodox Church – closely tied to Syrian Orthodoxy. After meeting Yazigi in Moscow, Russian politician Valentina Matviyenko said: ‘The prospect of a complete exodus of Christians from Syria...threatens to spread the process to other Middle Eastern countries – Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine. This scenario would be a civilizational catastrophe for the entire Middle East.’ ●

Australian journalist Chris Ray visited Syria in December 2013 and January 2014.