

'The most dangerous parish in the world'

Surrounded by bomb barricades and razor wire and protected 24/7 by armed guards, St George's Church in central Baghdad has been described as 'the most dangerous parish in the world'!

Built in 1936 and dedicated to British soldiers killed in WW1 in Mesopotamia, it stands on Haifa Street, in the 'front-line' in both war and 'peace'. The church has been bombed and attacked, closed for 10 years by Saddam Hussain and its staff and parishioners murdered.

Nevertheless over 1300 people – of many different denominations - consider themselves part of the St George's congregation making it one of the largest and most active churches in Iraq, with a major pastoral as well as a worshipping programme. It has even established a Mothers' Union currently with over 100 members.

The Anglican Vicar to Iraq and Rector of St George's is Canon Andrew White of The Foundation for Reconciliation in the Middle East.

In the 1990s he served his curacy in Battersea and later had his own parish in Balham.

He said "A few months ago, as I waited in the International Zone for a helicopter to take me to the other side of Baghdad, I suddenly realised that it was 20 years almost to the day since I had been asked



where I wanted to be in 20 years' time.

"It certainly wasn't in the middle of a war zone! My answer then was that I wanted to be a vicar in London. I achieved that aim - and then later became a canon at Coventry Cathedral. I loved both jobs. But now I am in a war zone, I love that, too - although I miss my wife and two young boys back home.

"Our lay leadership team was killed in September 2005 yet the church is filled to overflowing. We now have over 1300 members and all of them, apart from me, are Iraqis. The reality is that we have to have armed guards protecting the church 24 hours every day and most of our members are collected and returned from church in buses just to keep them safe to worship on the next Sunday.

"Coming to church is dangerous - some of my parishioners have been killed on their way. Each week I hear terrible stories: friends killed at the market, work places blown up, death threats to members of my congregation because

they are Christians.

"Countless women in the congregation wear black. Their husbands have been killed, many since last year.

"Reality is 100 times worse than anything you ever see on TV. Despite all these difficulties this is a most wonderful church of people desperate to stay close to the Lord amidst great turmoil. Each Sunday we collect about \$30 from the congregation. This is their sacrificial giving but the cost of running the church is £300 per day."

He is currently appealing to UK parishes to commit themselves to fund one day's ministry. Several already do but many more are needed if the church is to keep going.

Cheques should be made payable to the Naaman Trust and sent to the trust at 100 New Kings Road, London, SW6 4LX.

Each daily sponsor will receive a signed copy of Andrew's book "Iraq- searching for Hope" and regular information about 'the most dangerous parish in the world'.

Former chair of the Southwark Pastoral Auxiliary (SPA) Council Mary Clarke, has gone out to work in Palestine for three months with EAPPI, the Ecumenical Accompaniers Programme in Palestine and Israel - a World Council of Churches initiative. Here she writes about

The daily 'routine' of farming in Palestine.



The farming in Palestine for the past two thousand years is held up as an example of good husbandry despite the geography and the climate.

A recent survey by Diakonia, a Swedish International Humanitarian Law Programme, has also found that where the Palestinians were unable to farm their land because of the Israeli occupation and pollution from the growing Israeli settlements, some land is literally dying.

I have just returned to Jayyous from a few days training in Jerusalem. Today, as on many others, farmers were gathering the dead wood from their olive trees, to encourage new growth - and give the farmers and their families vital firewood. Palestinian homes are built for the hot weather - stone floors and walls, and no heating!

At the Falamiya Gate, a gate we monitor, an hour's walk from Jayyous, a tractor is straddled across 'No Man's Land' with the farmer standing beside it. He had passed through the turnstile and the terminal with the security monitors; had his permit checked by each of the eight soldiers. The permit was valid.

But... the tractor had no number plates. Suddenly a "New Law" had come into being! "No tractors allowed to pass through this gate to their land without number plates!"

Tractors round here are very old - mostly bought second-hand from Israelis. Palestinians cannot use Israeli number plates, but have permits with the colour, age and make of the tractor on them. That is all that is required, so this new law had to be challenged!

Meanwhile the farmer's son, age 10 or 11, and a friend stagger backwards and forwards collecting and carrying armfuls of firewood, watched by (amused) soldiers.

I approached the soldiers to find out about this "New Law" and then phoned their Commander. Three calls later, we were told that the farmer would be allowed across - in 10 minutes!

We waited ten minutes, but the soldiers received no orders. I called the Commander again. He hung up. By this time an hour had passed. The farmer was ready to go home.

It was a frustrating walk home. Normally, I am balanced and would give you the Israeli side of the argument - Security. And, to be fair, every State has the right to be secure. But I find it hard to fathom out how the presence of number plates on a bright red 1982 Ford Tractor whose permit, until that day was recognised as valid, should present a security threat to eight fully armed soldiers, and prevent a farmer from doing an honest day's work. But maybe I'm sickening for something....

The next day I was at another gate at 6.30 am, and the very same group of soldiers were there.

We did not speak until a tractor approached. A white one this time. And, yes, no number plates! Once permits were checked it was allowed to cross to the farmer's land. This was my moment. I walked across to the soldiers and asked why the sudden change in the law. "Yesterday. Just a little mistake!"

I have never felt so enraged. I explained that for the farmer it was not just a "little" mistake. It was a very big mistake, and that for us to watch the soldiers as they sat joking and smoking while the humiliation had taken place was deeply offensive and symptomatic of the larger picture in this beleaguered place.

You will all be delighted to know I am not sickening for anything!

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Closing date for applications - 4th May; Interviews 17th May

