

There are three small but mighty National Evangelical Synod of Churches congregations in Basrah, Bagdad and Kirkuk in Iraq. They are our partners, our “boots on the ground”, who are reaching Muslim families with compassion and love. They have already established the relationships, and are looking long-term, to impact the whole country of Iraq.

How are they doing it? In June 2018, Rev. David and Amy Joachim from Youngstown, Ohio joined Rev. Elmarie Parker to discover how these churches are putting God’s Word into action. Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he/she should go, and when he/she is old, he/she will not depart from it.”

These 3 churches, each with memberships of around 40-60 have developed preschools in their church compounds that are teaching 115, 160, and 220 4 and 5 year olds. Only 8 – 15% of the children are Christian. The preschools are wildly popular, because they focus on the Christian virtues of peace, honesty, kindness, helpfulness and love. And, in contrast to most government classrooms, they have small class sizes (20 instead of 50) and air conditioning!

In fact, the pastors and elders of the three churches, Pastor Amgad and Elder Zuhair in Basrah, Assis Farouk in Bagdad, and Pastor Haitham in Kirkuk are all expanding their preschools in September 2018. As they collect funds, they are adding elementary classrooms in Bagdad, nursery building in Kirkuk, and are looking for property to buy in Basrah.

These churches and their schools have the backing of the current Iraqi government because the pastors and church members have a reputation for integrity and wisdom. One evening we were able to meet with the Director of the Board of Health in Basrah, a city of three million. He was very supportive of the plan to expand the church schooling, saying, “We need to see preschools that show LOVE of children!”

More specifically, the three church preschools are doing something that is rare to absent in Iraq. They are inviting children with disabilities into their programs, and striving to educate their staff in special needs. That is why Elmarie asked Amy Joachim, a Speech-Language Pathologist, to come and teach seminars on autism, building language, handling behaviors, and giving parents support and ideas.

Amy taught 2-day seminars with Arabic interpreters in each city in June. The class participants were enthusiastic and dedicated to learning, even though it was Ramadan, and many of the Muslim teachers could not eat or drink until the first star came out in the evening (about 7:00). A total of over 100 teachers, aides and parents attended the seminars. Some parents brought their children with autism, and Amy had an opportunity to demonstrate interventions on the spot. In addition to teaching, Amy distributed a list of websites for further online training. The next step to facilitate learning needs to be translation of the website content into Arabic, as few teachers can read English. Elmarie and Amy are asking for someone who could do this important step. Elmarie is also hoping to arrange more special-needs training, possibly in a conference in Bagdad.

Meanwhile, Rev. David, who is also a YMCA lifeguard and swim instructor, took children and their families from the churches in Basrah and Kirkuk to nearby hotel swimming pools and taught the children water safety and swimming skills. He also preached at both the Basrah and Kirkuk churches and led music with guitar.

In Bagdad, Milad, a young 9-year-old with autism, lives on the church compound with his parents who work there. He has never been to school, because there are no classes for

handicapped students in Iraqi public schools. After the autism seminar, Assis Farouk and Elmarie set up a fund through the Presbyterian Church (USA) so that anyone who wishes can contribute to a tutor for Milad three times a week at a cost of \$300 a month.

Our Iraqi Christian brothers and sisters are living out Christ's message of love to His world, the 9 "shining stars" Paul talks about in Philippians 2:15. We are inspired by them.

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