

The situation of Christians and the Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria

By Rev. Haroutune Selimian

“For this, we are called to embody this Word of God: 'I know the plans that I have for you', declares the Lord. 'They are plans for peace and not disaster, plans to give you a future filled with hope’. (Jeremiah, 29,11).

Syria's Christian community is one of the oldest in the world, having been around for two millennia. Despite their minority status, Christians have long been among Syria's elite. They have been represented in many of the political groups, which have vied for control of the country, including the secular Arab nationalist and socialist movements, which eventually came to the fore.

Throughout much of its history, Christians have held significant influence.

Christians have played an important role in healthcare and the provision of aid. Their faith-based organizations have been better able to utilize local distribution networks for aid than secular non-governmental organizations.

Christians in Syria are also known for their higher than average educational achievements. Creative production in Syria has largely relied on the influence of Christians, There were approximately 300 schools in Syria run by Christian charities prior to 2012.

Many fear, therefore, that the loss of a Christian influence in Syria could open a greater space for extremism, in relation to the sectors of education and culture.

Christians are also active in politics, with a number of Christian political parties in Syria. In general Christians have cooperated with the regime in Syria and have held senior government posts.

In Syria there was general freedom of worship. Under the Baathist regime, Christian communities were allowed to purchase land, build churches or other institutions.

Christians there have always been peaceful, living in harmony with the Syrian Muslims of all factions, but whenever there was an imbalance or period of unrest, the leaders took it out on the Christian groups, describing them as invaders, even though many of them have been there since the beginning, centuries before Islam.

And when I go into the Scriptures I find that my country is very much part of the Bible Lands. What to say about Saul who later on became Paul the Apostle and how he right at the beginning of Christianity found himself on the way to 'my' Capital Damascus. Already back then there was a Church in Damascus, and you'd better

believe it, it's still there. Back there two thousand years ago this church was so alive that the Jewish Elders back in Jerusalem wanted to put an end to it. It sent their most blood-thirsty and militant leader in the direction of Damascus and you know what happened on that road to Damascus. You also know how scared the Church in Damascus was of this Saul. They needed a divine intervention to send one of their people to meet Saul and become the means of Saul being healed and later on a 'world evangelist'.

From this averted attempt at persecuting the Church of Damascus we can learn a few things. The first thing: ☐God does take care of His Church!|☐ The second thing: ☐He uses the local Church members to take part in the change!☐ The third thing: ☐The most blood-thirsty terrorists can experience the love of Jesus and the power of Jesus for change!☐

As Christians we have been and are an integral part of the Syrian society. Until the beginning of the war, there were Christians in almost every town and city in the country. They had their Churches and they were probably more connected to the Church than people are in most European countries. As there often is a school connected with the Church, this makes it more likely that many Christian parents will send their children to the school and in this way a larger percentage of the Christian population will be in touch with the Church.

This situation was seven years ago, but it has dramatically changed since. In some towns and cities there has been an ethnic cleansing, something we as Armenians are "used to". In most cases the Christians have been able to flee without most of their possessions, saving only their own lives. In some cases, and some have been very much heard of in the West, a large number of Christians have been kidnapped and held for months and months while others have left with their clothes on their bodies. Yes, large numbers are still being held hostage. In two areas of Syria there has been some kind of settlement whereby the Christians have been allowed to come back to their villages. One such area is around the Khabour River in North-Eastern Syria. The second area is the Armenian Kessab, which was taken over four years ago and held for three months. Once retaken, people found that most Churches had been burnt and destroyed and almost all shops ransacked and many houses ransacked and destroyed. Few people have had the means to fix up their houses. The challenges are already there and most of them are a matter of survival.

In all of this, you find the Church. The Church is still there and it's functioning. May be more than most of you would like it to be. Not only holding masses and inviting people to meet Christ in a building, no, the Church in our country has had to go to the people like so many times before in its history.

The Armenian and Christian communities have been mobilized to take care of their own as well as others in need. The heads of the Armenian and Christian Church communities, have done their utmost to see that life defeats death.

The Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria has never stopped its social services during the war and in many ways it has even increased them. The Armenian Evangelical Churches in Aleppo have been a center for help and comfort since the Armenian Genocide until today. With the new crisis, which started in 2011 the Church realized that church-members who had been doing fairly well suddenly couldn't pay the school-fees and were struggling to pay the rent and buy the necessities of life. The Church suddenly became an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) and studied the situation and decided what it could do and what it couldn't do. The Church got in touch with friends who in turn suggested ways of raising funds to help the community the very best way. The Church also saw the needs outside the community and decided to try to do something for others as well. Bethel Poly-Clinic is a good proof of this. In 2013 the Armenian Evangelical Bethel Church established "Bethel Polyclinic" in Aleppo. The aim was right from the beginning to run a clinic, which would have specialists in the most common fields of medicine available to the public. It was also set up to receive patients who had been injured

during the war in Syria. "Bethel Polyclinic" was also set up to help patients with chronic diseases and thus in need of long-term medical assistance. In 2017 the Armenian Evangelical Bethel Church established a nursery and accommodates 20 children (ages 1 -3). In 2018 the "Polyclinic" decided to widen its medical services by establishing a new dental clinic.

During the Syrian War, the first thing was to help people with the School-fees without lowering the educational standard of the School. The church also decided to provide the community members with good nutrition and this certainly made a difference in the lives of many families. There were also other basic needs at home and therefore in time the Church decided to give a monetary gift on a regular basis to people in need. Visiting families has become a must in this situation and through the visits other needs surfaced and have been dealt with. One of these is Trauma Treatment. There are so many totally traumatized people in the community and "normal" pastoral care is not enough. That's why the Church is trying to hold training sessions for people involved with the traumatized.

As good hygiene in the homes is a must, the Church has distributed hygienic packs to the families throughout the war and

through its visits. It's certainly better to prevent the disease than to try and cure it.

On the whole, the Church tried to protect and support the people against whom this war has been waged. We want to be a healing element, where the human being is truly treated as one.

Concerning the renovation of our destructed churches in Aleppo and Kessab (Emmanuel and Holy Trinity Church). We praise God that we could rebuilt the Armenian Evangelical Holy Trinity Church in Kessab which was burnt back in 2014 by the rebel forces and it had required major repairs, which had been under way for more than a year. It's a big church with a parsonage on the first floor and rooms for youth and children's activities.

We have also started to repair the Armenian Evangelical Emmanuel Church's very special roof and God willing the inauguration of the church will be in Late November 2018 and the members of the church will be able to worship in their own church facility again.

When war-affected populations resettled in a safe location or entered the post-conflict phase, we have observed difficulties in regulating strong emotional responses to stressors. Therefore, the Church played a very important role in helping people to cope with all difficulties. Recently, we have launched a vocational training and business startup training to IDPs and affected host communities in

order to preserve and develop the wellbeing and resiliency of IDPs and host communities toward more self-dependency and social stability.

As a community, we will always continue to work for peace and co-existence. It will take an effort, but as a person believing that the Bible is the Word of God, I do believe that we as Christians are made for this kind of situation! This is the time when we can really test our faith! Once peace reigns, we will need a lot of this faith to rebuild what has been torn down and replace what has been false with truth and decide to live trusting the others for good and make them know that we are there for them and they are there for us. It will take all of our Christian virtues, but Syria is worth the challenge and we will never give up.

Finally, after a war, which has exhausted us here and in many countries in Europe, we certainly know that we cannot do this by ourselves. For years to come, we will need the assistance of many more NGOs than the ones we have already been working with in the past years. We also need and will need human resources that are presently scarce here. And most of all, we need people with us, who will encourage us to continue the work that we believe has been inspired by God Himself.

Yes, the Syrian Church was persecuted from the first day of its existence, as we heard at the beginning of my speech. Saul, the enemy

of the Church, had a meeting with the Living Jesus Christ, who he persecuted, and his life was changed. The course of the Church was changed as Saul becoming Paul became the person who reached out beyond his own community. Paul reached Europe with the Gospel and he was also one of the first people who reached out to the people of the Syrian City of Antioch, where they first were called Christians. He realized that the mission to make Jesus Christ known should be taken seriously both at home, in Syria, and to the end of the world. Has the time come for us from the Christian Community of Syria to reach out beyond our communities and see the new Christian Church born once more in a living way in Syria and beyond.

In fact, our treasure as Christian is "hope." We live in the Lord's living hope which gives us the power to continue our life despite all difficulties. At times of fear we give trust, at times of persecution we spread the word of God and testify to God's glory, at times of troubles we become stronger in God and do good to people who are in need or who are making troubles for us, and at times of despair we give thanks to God. "Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who hope in me will not be disappointed" (Isaiah 49:23).

We have to continue building the house of the Lord anywhere and everywhere we exist. Even in the midst of troubles we, as Christians, should not be exempt from this mission. With hope we can do many things.

At this time, we pray that Jesus Christ, the King of Peace, will bring peace and tranquility to Syria, its people and Christians in the Middle East. Let us keep our eyes on the Lord and remember that the Lord is in control, and that faith is the mechanism by which we will endure the tough times.

In the end, we ask you to pray for the Christians who chose to stay in Syria.

-Pray for the priests and pastors, and for the church members who made the choice to remain and serve God in their home land.

-Pray that God will give them the strength to continue and that He will impart wisdom to all involved in helping those in need.

-Pray for peace and an end to the bloodshed and violence.

-Pray for children traumatized by violence, and families who have lost loved ones. Pray for those who have been kidnapped, whether Christian or Muslim.

☒ For the sick, the needy and those injured through the violence

☞ *For courage and unity for church leaders in all Christian denominations.*

☞ *Save us, Lord our God, and gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise.*☞ *Psalm 106:47*