

April 2019 Visit Report

Contents

Education

- Mar Qardakh School, Ankawa
- Al Bishara School, Ankawa
- Mar Michel, Al Qosh

Rebuilding after ISIS – Al Qosh, Tesqopa (Telskof), Batnaya

The Current Aid Situation

Stories from Mosul



Education

Mar Qardakh School, Ankawa

The main purpose of this visit was to help us to prepare for the Professional Development Summer School that we will be running in July for the MQS teachers. MQS is the diocese's flagship school pioneering the teaching of IB in Iraq.

As part of this, we met frequently with Carolen, the Diploma Programme Coordinator for the School, who arranged for us to observe a range of lessons on the final day of term. We were impressed by the students' kindness, enthusiasm for learning and particularly their ability to stand up and present their thoughts to the rest of the class – all key IB habits.

After observing ten hours of lessons between us, we met with all the teachers in the school and gave them an opportunity to suggest what would be most useful for them in the summer professional development programme. There was a lively exchange of views! We were also pleased to share our initial findings with both Carolen and Sally, the headmistress. As a result

of these discussions, we have a much clearer idea of what is needed and – although there is a huge amount of work for us to do beforehand – we feel confident in our ability to deliver a useful programme.

However, as Archbishop Warda told us over lunch, this is only the first step. MQS is naturally struggling with being a frontrunner in education in the region and will need continued help over the next few years as they prepare for their IB evaluation in 2021. If anyone knows of someone who can help them in any way on this exciting journey of discovery, please get in touch.



bishopwarda @bishopwarda · 21h

I welcome & thank the British charity "Ankawa Foundation (AF)" for their visit at Mar Qardakh IB school preparing for their July training of our teachers. Helen & Tom are UK teachers. Elliot at Al Bishara school with Sister Samar where AF funded new science and computer labs.





Al Bishara School, Ankawa

This diocesan primary school is unique in that it teaches in Arabic, the language of the displaced families who send their children here. Coming to the end of its first year, and run by Sister Sama, this year we funded science equipment and IT provision to make the school legally compliant within the Kurdish school system. It currently has children from 4 to 9 years but will grow the school to take the current children all the way through to 12 from next year. It already has 25 first year children registered to enrol in the Autumn, when it will grow

to over 80 children – its final expected school rota is planned to be 200 children. Arabic speaking children who cannot afford fees are often excluded from the Kurdish school system or struggle to keep up within it. As well as local Iraqi families, there are several Syrian refugee children who are admitted free due to their poverty.

Several issues remain here – one is teacher training, which would need to be in Arabic (although they do aim to teach English to the children). The second is in space and equipment. Whilst a private school, as the school grows it will need support for materials as the fees are kept low to ensure affordability for the families and go towards building maintenance and teacher salaries – which are already way below the diocesan, and state average.

AF aims to continue to support Al Bishara school through 2019 through a grant for materials to be provided for the new school year in October 2019. We hope to match last year’s grant of \$8000 for the provision of science and IT equipment to make the school compliant. We also hope to bring books and other education support equipment to the school on our visit in July 2019.



Mar Michel School, Al Qosh



There is evidence for a school attached to the church of Mar Michel since the sixth century; one of the oldest known Christian schools in the world. However, it has of late fallen out of use and been replaced by three state schools around the town. However, thanks to the generosity of donors in America and the Hungarian government, the school of Mar Michel is opening once again.

The new buildings, next to the New Monastery of Rabban Hormizd, are in the process of being built and the plan is to open the school as a new private school for 200 children in 2020. Over 60% of children in Iraq attend private schools due to the terrible state of national Iraqi education, and much of the schooling around Al Qosh is in the wrong language. What is notable about the new Mar Michel is that it will be open to both Christian and Yazidi children, as well as catering to the forty orphans in the church’s orphanages in the town.

The school is a way off being completed, but we promised Fr Salarkajo that we would visit it again in July to see progress. We have also raised the future prospect of providing future training of their teachers in conjunction with MQS.

Rebuilding after ISIS – and what remains to be done

One of the privileges of staying overnight in Al Qosh, thanks to the hospitality of the amazing Fr Aram, the parish priest of Batnaya, was seeing how much rebuilding has happened after ISIS. The church is taking the

lead in organising the redevelopment not only of the towns of Tesqopa and Batnaya, but also of the communities themselves.

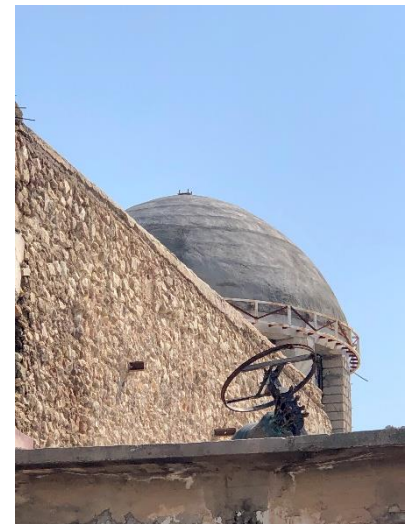


At Tesqopa, after entering down a street pockmarked by bullet holes and shelled houses, we were lucky enough to witness the replacement work restoring the cross of Mar George's on top of the church. This building had been ravaged by ISIS during their occupation and the transformation of the interior was breathtaking. 50 children were sat inside, preparing for their First Holy Communion. In the building next door, a group of adults with Downs Syndrome and a range of disabilities were enjoying a group class for singing and dancing. The church has always been the centre of the community here and the walls of the offices were adorned with maps charting and planning the restoration of the whole town. It is a monumental task.

A little further down the road, the church of Mar Joseph was in the process of having its walls and dome finished. The bell from the old tower lay on the new roof, waiting to be refitted so that it could be rung out over the Nineveh Plains once again. Back in Al Qosh, the shrine of the prophet Nahum, who foretold the destruction of the Assyrian Empire millennia ago, had new walls and a new roof, no longer exposed to the elements. In the works yard next door, the new lintels for the entrance lay, waiting to greet visitors for the next millennium.

However, there is a huge amount still needed. Even though many of the houses in the town have been restored, much of the Old Town with their centuries old houses, has been abandoned, ravaged by rapid decay from standing empty. The mud brick of the Nineveh Plains has not responded well to the wettest winter in sixty years.

From Tesqopa, we could see the Peshmerga frontline and beyond that, the water tower of Batnaya, the parish of Fr Aram, our host. 80% of the town is completely destroyed. There is only water in a fifth of the town. 650 families' homes are in ruins. When we asked Fr Aram what he needed, he laughed and replied, "Everything."



The physical rebuilding is only one part of the process. There is real concern amongst the church about the psychological impact of the ISIS emergency on the communities. The old people are traumatised, the young depressed and frightened. To combat this, Fr Aram has set up two Trauma Centres, one in Al Qosh and one in Tesqopa. We were lucky enough to visit the Al Qosh centre on our last visit and heard much about its excellent work providing psychotherapy for PTSD and its training of the young people for work skills and against early marriage and gender-based violence. It was inspiring to see its work continuing and expanded to include its close neighbour, Tesqopa. Crucially, the centres are open to all faiths, particularly important in Al Qosh which has a large Yazidi minority living nearby. As was written in large letters in each of the classrooms in the centres, "We are all one family."

As part of the Centres' work in improving the chances of the young survivors in the community, Fr Aram has also instituted English lessons (English being the most sought-after language; a philosophy also evident in the Anglophone MQS). It was rather delightful therefore to walk into one of the classrooms and see it bedecked with double-decker buses, the Houses of Parliament, red phoneboxes and Big Ben in the middle of the Nineveh Plain!



We also discussed the financing of the centres with Fr Aram. Because of the expense of getting professional therapists to come to stay at the centres, the budget from last year was \$127000 in total. However, he was keen to stress that a lot of that came from individual small donations.

The Current Aid Situation

A worrying development on this visit was the significant sense of frustration with the Aid Agencies and the difficulty of translating their pledges into reality on the ground. USAID and UNDP were seen as being genuinely helpful. However, the huge increase in funding promised by the Trump Administration in Washington – the HR390 funding – had simply not materialised. Other countries had promised aid and then the money had dried up as soon as a Minister had visited and the photo opportunity taken.

In the rebuilding of Tesqopa, we heard of how UNICEF forbade the rebuilding of the local school unless under their supervision. When the day came for the opening, it was discovered that they had repainted all of the walls, but that the interior was a burnt-out shell. Fr Salarkajo told a meeting of UK Parliamentarians about this disgrace and got an apology and the school was soon refitted.

Fr Aram was more reticent about criticising the Aid organisations. However, he did tell us, with a wry smile, that there were 3680 foreign NGOs registered in Iraq. He then very eloquently turned to face the map of his devastated village, still ruined two years after liberation.



Stories from Mosul

While it was moving to see the progress and hard work of those who had returned to their former homes in the Nineveh Plains, we were also fortunate enough to spend time with those who had been forced to flee Mosul five years ago and those who were now able to go back and resume their former lives.



One of these, Victor, the dentist of Al Qosh, invited us in to tea in his house so that he could share his story. We were soon joined by many of his friends and neighbours. As we ate the Turkish Delight he had bought in Mosul that week, he recounted – through Fr Aram’s translation – the night that ISIS had taken the city by surprise. The bishop – fortunately – had been giving a lecture in Erbil that night and so avoided capture (unlike one of his priests and three deacons who were gunned down outside their church). With the situation uncertain, the bishop phoned Victor – a member of the Church Council – and asked him to retrieve vital documents. As a result, Victor, a dentist, found himself that night breaking into the church offices via a nextdoor property, clambering over back walls and smuggling out vital deeds and registers so that the church might, some day, return and resume its role.

We asked what had happened to his own possessions? He shrugged and gestured around the room. Since the liberation of the city, he had returned to his home and searched around his neighbours- these few things were all that remained from the looters: a painting of the Holy Family, a San Damiano cross, a small statue of Napoleon

and a clock shaped like an anchor. Did this not make him angry, we asked? Victor smiled, on the contrary. The last time he went back, he bought another house around the corner from his first. If his neighbours thought they could get rid of him, they clearly had a surprise coming.

Staying with Victor that weekend was his son, Yunus, named for the Prophet Jonah whose tomb ISIS destroyed as they lost control of the city. Yunus was in his final year at Mosul University studying Telecommunications Engineering and spent five days a week living in the city. We asked him what the atmosphere was like? A little shyly, he told us that, in much of the Western part of the city, life had returned to normal. "Was there tension still between Muslims and Christians?" He shrugged. Yes, the girls felt they had to wear head scarves, but they did not discriminate otherwise: "My friends don't really see us like that; we don't see each other as Muslim or Christian." He told us how university life continued as before the war; some of the buildings had been destroyed and they often had to move classrooms, but they were making the best of it. It was powerful to hear from a young student determined not to let the horrors and chaos of the last few years hold them back from completing their education and making their way in the world.

As Victor reminded us: "ISIS was hard on our Muslim neighbours too. It was hard on all of us."

