



Journey to Baghdad

Malcolm Russell Interviews Lawrence Geraty

Editor's Note: When we learned that La Sierra University president Lawrence Geraty had visited Baghdad in 2002, we thought our readers would appreciate hearing about it and gaining some insight into the Adventist Church in that country. We asked Malcolm Russell, an expert on the Middle East, to interview Geraty for *Spectrum*. Both Russell and Geraty lived in Beirut, Lebanon, as children while their parents served as missionaries.

Today there are 204 members belonging to three churches in the Iraq Field, which is part of the Middle East Union Mission and the Trans-European Division of Seventh-day Adventists. The beginning of the Adventist Church in Iraq dates back to 1911, when Bashir Hasso, a native of Mosul, Iraq, went to Beirut as a student at American University. There he read the book *Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation* by Uriah Smith and was baptized. Upon returning to his native country he shared his faith and by 1928 had seven persons ready for baptism. That was when the church in Iraq was officially organized.

RUSSELL: Dr. Geraty, *Spectrum* readers know you as the president of La Sierra University and possibly also as the president of ASOR, the American Schools of Oriental Research. Last summer, you visited Iraq, a somewhat unusual move for an American. Would you share with *Spectrum* why you took that trip?

GERATY: I traveled to Baghdad last August as a pastor, not as the president of a university or an organization of academic archaeologists. I was asked to perform the wedding of Fatta Nahab, a La Sierra alumnus and family friend. His mother is the daughter of Ghanim Fargo, for decades a faithful leader of the Adventist community in Iraq. Her mother is a Hasso, once the most prominent Iraqi Adventist merchant family. When these Christians friends asked me to come, I agreed.

RUSSELL: But there are sanctions and all sorts of difficulties blocking

trade with Iraq. You can't just call up your travel agent and ask for a ticket and a visa. How did you manage to get there?

GERATY: For my part, things were relatively simple, and I reached Baghdad in the comfort of a jet airliner rather than the buses that bounce along the long, hot, and bumpy highway from Amman, Jordan. My hosts arranged the Iraqi visa, and because U.S. sanctions prohibit payment for flights to Iraq, they also provided an airline ticket on a regularly scheduled Royal Jordanian Airlines flight. Of course, Arab hospitality covered my stay in the country.

RUSSELL: As an American, did you experience any unusual events while traveling?

GERATY: From the moment others on the flight realized that I was not only a Westerner but also an American, they were surprised and even shocked. But to a person, they were pleased that an American was visiting the country. They helped me with advice on filling out the immigration forms, even recommending a hotel to list as my local address. Unlike most of the other passengers, I managed to clear the airport without paying any *bakhshish*, or tips.

In contrast to the unfailing graciousness of ordinary Iraqis, the official line was bitterly antagonistic. For example, in the jetway to the new and attractive Saddam International Airport terminal, there were no anti-American posters, but every fifty feet or so the floor was inscribed with the words "Down [with] U.S.A."

RUSSELL: What were your general impressions of Baghdad?

GERATY: The first thing that will overwhelm a summer visitor is the heat. The thermometer hit 118 degrees Fahrenheit while I was there, so daily life naturally becomes nocturnal. Wedding festivities, for example, seemed to last until 4 a.m. or later.

From the air-conditioned comfort of a room high in the Meridian Hotel (renamed, after the Gulf War, the Palestine Hotel, but still commonly called the Meridian), I could look out over a city that missed the real estate boom that has transformed most other capitals during the last twenty years. Bomb damage from the Gulf War is not evident, even at street level, but there are only a very few buildings of twenty stories or more. By contrast, apartment buildings of six or eight floors are common.

Closer up, Baghdad is very crowded, with a "Havana" look to it: clean streets, but buildings in even the better part of town are turning shabby and decrepit, though not yet slums. Cars somehow still keep running, although many of them were imported

before the Iran-Iraq War two decades ago. One difference with Cuba, of course, is the cheap price of gasoline. Priced in U.S. dollars, it's virtually free.

In public, there's little flashiness or style, and people show signs of the hard living during the past two decades. For most Iraqis, conditions were frequently dreadful, and it sometimes shows. For example, I don't think I saw a single pudgy person the entire time I was there. Making ends meet is a challenge for the vast majority, including government officials, and paying *bakhshish* on almost every occasion has become a normal way of life. Millions of nearly worthless dinars are redistributed that way. Nevertheless, everything seemed calm and quiet; life went on as normally as it could.

RUSSELL: Did people speak freely to you about conditions?

GERATY: You must remember the circumstances: Adventists are few in Iraq, and American visitors much scarcer. Clearly this was not an occasion for anyone to reveal any private political aspirations for their country. During the entire visit I never asked anyone for a political comment, and I never heard a single criticism of the president, Saddam Hussein. The comment commonly heard about life was simply "It's hard." As a university administrator, I can imagine, for example, how difficult professors must find life: low pay, no foreign textbooks, a scarcity of laboratory equipment and materials, virtually no opportunities to research and publish. . . .

RUSSELL: But surely Saddam Hussein was ever-present; the press mentions the many posters and frequent statues of him.

GERATY: Certainly there's a real cult of personality around the Iraqi leader. It's very evident in the statues at every bridge and major crossing. On the other hand, nobody talked to me about him or the situation—and it was not my role to ask them.

RUSSELL: Arabs not talking politics? Isn't that unusual?

GERATY: People were unfailingly gracious and kind, happy to see me and to welcome me. But discussion of politics was excluded. As I said earlier, I went to Iraq as a pastor, to minister to believers in Christ, who under these circumstances often feel isolated and discouraged. So direct political discussions were out.

Nevertheless, I picked up a sense that people clearly worried about the future. They conveyed a



Members of the SDA church in Baghdad.



Vocal group of the SDA church in Baghdad.

sense of apprehension, anticipating difficulties or even war with the United States. Others, however, seemed actually indifferent to an impending war because of the hopelessness they feel about the future and about anyone in the outside world really wanting to make life better for them. Life is clearly hard in a country that in twenty years has suffered two wars and a decade of sanctions. Naturally there is concern about the losses and hardship another war would bring.

RUSSELL: Could you tell us a bit about that Adventist community?

GERATY: A bittersweet atmosphere surrounded the wedding and a separate engagement reception for another couple while I was there. First of all, despite many hardships in the past, the Adventist community in Baghdad enjoys a great deal of religious freedom. In contrast to prohibitions in Saudi Arabia and some of the smaller Gulf states, believers meet regularly and openly.

The ideology that inspires the ruling Ba'athist party was originally secular, and Muslim fundamentalism is much less influential in Baghdad than in any capital in the Arabian peninsula. Indeed, Mrs. Saddam Hussein has apparently paid goodwill visits to the Adventist Church and those of other denominations at Christmastime, even leaving generous donations.

The Baghdad church itself is impressive. On a major thoroughfare, it is beautifully decorated, with both organ and piano, and has a commodious fellowship hall as well. These facilities are sometimes used by Christians of other denominations for special services. The Adventist pastor is an Iraqi, and the youth pastor a Jordanian who grew up in the Amman

orphanage, and is now married to an Iraqi. Some of our members have managed to live quite well.

Nevertheless, in common with much of the Middle East, many would like to emigrate, particularly to the United States. The bride whose wedding I performed might be considered one of the lucky ones, marrying an Iraqi-American physician and leaving the country for southern California. But the joy of the occasion must have been marred, in many hearts, by the recognition that the bride was leaving the community and country.

RUSSELL: What about the wedding and related ceremonies? Were they culturally North American Adventist, or Arab?

GERATY: Most American Adventists would have felt quite at home with many features of the wedding ceremony, down to the Bible boy and flower girl. However, one local custom caught my eye. Following the wedding rehearsal, accompanied by much ululating, each of the unmarried women and older girls dipped a finger into henna, the herbal dye much used in the Middle East. At the wedding ceremony the next day, they still retained that stained finger. Unfortunately, my post-midnight flight left before the reception reached its full extent.

RUSSELL: Apparently at one point technology came to rescue human failing.

GERATY: It certainly did. The leading conductor in Baghdad, apparently one of the country's best musicians, had been hired to play the organ and piano for the ceremony. However, he arrived at the wedding rehearsal with his head bandaged after suffering some sort of accident. By the third or fourth line of music,

it was apparent that the poor man's coordination had been greatly disturbed, either by the wound or the medication for it, and his attempt to make music sounded, well, horrible.

Fortunately, one of the groomsmen came to the rescue. An accomplished musician himself, he performed the pieces and recorded them on his computer, then for the wedding he played the piano and organ using his computer recording. It worked very well.

RUSSELL: So much for United Nations sanctions that probably ban the sale of such a computer to Iraq,

our annual conference in Toronto in November.

RUSSELL: In conclusion, with the prospect of war increasing steadily, what is your viewpoint about a possible American attack on Iraq?

GERATY: As Christians, we personally should be searching for a peaceful solution to the crisis. Certainly no one in any Western nation admires Saddam Hussein. Certainly, too, the international community of nations has legal and moral justification to ask for inspections to ensure there are no weapons of mass destruction. But if America is really interested in

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citing its possible military use. Since your presence was somewhat unusual, did you make any remarks beyond the normal wedding homily?

GERATY: I did. At the suggestion of the groom's grandfather, Ghanim Fargo, I expressed my solidarity with the people of Iraq, and spoke of my hope as an American that my government "will play a constructive role for peace and justice." On another occasion, I helped the leaders of the Adventist Church in Iraq draft congratulations and best wishes to the new Archbishop of Canterbury.

RUSSELL: Did you make any archaeological contacts at all during your visit?

GERATY: Only one. Accompanied by one of our active laymen, Basim Fargo, I visited the director of the Department of Antiquities, a former professor from Mosul, in the north, honoring an appointment with him made for me by my friend, the director of the Department of Antiquities in Jordan. The Iraqi official had heard of Adventists, and this provided an opportunity for Basim to explain the Adventist lifestyle, health principles, and the Sabbath, a constant point of confusion in the Arab Middle East that leads on occasion to our being identified as Jews. The director's response was appreciative. Incidentally, I believe the Seventh-day Adventist Assyrian King List found by Siegfried Horn is still on exhibit in the museum that I took the opportunity to visit again.

After discussing the very difficult circumstances of Iraqi archaeology, including missing volumes of important journals, as president of the American Schools of Oriental Research I invited the director to

reducing terrorism, the Arab-Israeli conflict is the issue America needs to confront and help resolve.

It's also worth mentioning that Iraqi Christians would find religious freedom significantly worse under a radical Muslim fundamentalist regime like Iran's, or the Wahhabi rule of Saudi Arabia. The Iraqi alternatives to Saddam Hussein are worrisome, and neighboring countries, especially Syria, Turkey, and Iran, are unlikely to avoid the temptation to meddle in the uncertain politics that would likely accompany any new regime.

Personally, I hope for a rapid conclusion to the weapons issue, a peaceful end to the embargo, and then an opportunity for the Iraqi people to rejoin the human race on their own terms. Iraqis deserve to be known as I have come to know them: smart, urbane, gracious, hospitable, and with all the human feelings the rest of us have!

RUSSELL: Thank you very much.

This interview is based on notes taken Friday, Sept. 6, 2002, during a visit that Lawrence Geraty made to Andrews University.

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