

Classical School of the Medes

Classical Christian Education in northern Iraq

by Pastor Yousif Mati with Dave Dillard & Wally Quillen

In 1998, the idea of starting schools in northern Iraq was first discussed. My own children were receiving an American home school education with the help of Servant Group International (SGI) and Franklin Classical School (FCS). My friends and those I knew in the cities of Iraqi Kurdistan were complaining because their children were suffering in the public schools.

I decided to check into the public education system. It was very broken, so broken, with little or no curriculum or textbooks, poorly qualified teachers, and low standards. It was really difficult for students to get a very good education. So that's how the idea

started. We thought our church could help our nation if we could start good schools. The school idea was developed by SGI and the first Classical School of the Medes (CSM) was opened in January 2001.

Our homeschooling curriculum was a Christian system, so I figured that it should not be used just to educate a few families. We could help the minds and souls of so many little kids in Iraq. The kids might either be from the few Christian families or from Muslim families that wished for their children to spend time on Christian materials.

In the beginning, I had no

idea what classical education was really. For me, I just knew that we had to choose a good educational system and add Christian materials to that. Then I got to know the classical system after the brothers—David Dillard and Dr. George Grant—explained it to me. First, it allowed us to get good educational materials in the hands of the students so parents could see that their children were getting a good education. Secondly, it included God's truth

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to orient the lives of the kids, help them to understand the Christian life, and lead them to Christ.

Now, in 2008, we have three schools. In the Erbil school we have K1, K2, and the first four grades of elementary. Dohuk goes to grade five, while Sulaymania goes to grade eleven. Remember that the mother tongue here is not English. That's why we decided to start the children when they are four and five years old in what we call K1 and K2. In reality it's a preparation more than a little child coming to kindergarten. We are preparing them for what they will need in grade one—especially

the English basics and math.

Our teaching staff includes a total of around sixty Iraqi teachers and nine international teachers. The international teachers do direct teaching in their fields of expertise such as humanities, English, mathematics, or science. In addition, they may have responsibilities to train Iraqi teachers and strengthen the abilities of the national teachers. We have added a training center which will be ready in December.

Tuition is the main source of income for the schools. It is about \$100 per month, a slightly different amount for each school. Money also comes from SGI for some scholarships.

Tuition pays for teacher salaries, maintenance, books—all operating expenses. Indirectly through SGI, we get curriculum development, teacher training, and international teachers. SGI and other ministry partners also help us with construction of buildings, which is very expensive. If we had to pay for construction and international teachers' salaries like the “international schools,” our tuition would be so high that few families could afford it.

The total number of students has now passed 1,500 in the three schools. This includes the K1 and K2 classes at each school. On average, over 95% of the kids are from Muslim families. If we could open the doors for more parents to register their children

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in the schools, I can assure you that we could have three or four thousand students. Just this year we denied more than two hundred applications in each school. We're having an impact, but we cannot do all we want to do.

Every year I can see that the people are more open to accept the Christian life and principles. We have Christmas and Easter celebrations, summer camp, graduation parties, birthday parties for little kids in the classrooms—each time we focus on Jesus Christ. Every time we pray, “May the Lord protect you, may the Lord use you, and may you discover God.” We try to model Christian behavior. We are transferring an understanding of the Christian life to these little kids and their families. Each year I have a package of gifts which I send home with the students—books, tapes, etc. The children's Bible is also a textbook, so they take it home. This year, in the music and physical education programs, we are including a focus on Christian behavior. Because of the relationship and interaction in these classes we want more of a focus on biblical teaching.

We have many parents telling our teachers how pleased they are with the moral life at the school. With us, morals are just as important as the academic subjects. The minds and hearts of the little kids are being transformed. There are other private schools here. At some of them the parents are facing problems with their children. I know parents who are sending their children to CSM just for the moral life, even though they could afford tuition at more expensive schools. But they said, “No, we want our children at CSM.”

Muslim families want Christian



Noor, Alia, and Pastor Yousif Mati.

Photo courtesy of WORLD magazine.

teaching for their children. One father came to the school. He was a Kurdish man who had recently moved back from Europe and wanted to register his child in the school. We asked him why he chose CSM. First, he said, “I wanted to find a school in the country without the Islamic religion being taught and I couldn't find that. They told me there is no Islamic religion at CSM.” The principal at CSM told him that “not only do we not have Islamic religion, but we do have Christian teaching from the Bible at CSM.” He said, “That is better!”

Our goal is to meet with ten parents a day at each school—and not just to meet with the accountant! We have critical cases where we invite parents in for special meetings. We also call parents for talks when the students are doing well. Teachers also have special activities like picnics with the parents. In Erbil, my wife, Alia, is working as a counselor. If there is any problem with a student, or an issue reported by a teacher, she will call for a meeting with the parents. With a Christian attitude, she will try to find and address the root of that problem. We have discovered some extremely serious cases. One child didn't want to go home from school. She had the

smell of kerosene on her clothing. We discovered that her mother had tried to commit suicide that morning. Her parents had been yelling and screaming at each other before she left for school. We called the mom and dad, counseled with them, and prayed with them.

We like students to get a good education. But without developing their personal lives, their spiritual lives, we are not really hitting the target. We can see the lives of the parents being changed as a reflection of the changes in the lives of their children. The parents are confessing mistakes, asking forgiveness, and forgiving others.

Last year a reporter for a national magazine wrote an article about his daughter who is a student at the school. A boy pushed his daughter down on the playground. She went home and her father saw a bruise on her face. The father got very mad and started cursing. The daughter, five years old, looked at her father and asked, “Dad, why are you so angry?” He said, “I need to go to the school and I need to do this and that, etc.” The girl said, “No, dad, the boy helped me to stand up and asked me to forgive him. And, I told him, ‘I forgive you.’ So, why are you angry?” The title of the father's article was

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“The Magic of Forgiveness.” The father’s heart had been touched by the example of his five year old daughter. He came the next day to the school. Instead of shouting at us, he said, “Thank you, you are helping my daughter.”

I have been asked what challenges we are facing and how believers and Christian schools in America can help us. Well, our greatest challenge is pressure from the government and security offices wanting us to accept more students. In Erbil for example, our target was to accept sixty K1 students. But this year, because of the pressure on us, we accepted 120 in K1—double the numbers. The same thing happened in Dohuk and Sulaymania.

But what about in grades one through twelve? In the future, doubling K1 will create a huge number in the upper grades. In the future, I will need double the classrooms for each grade. The “snowball” is getting bigger. We will need to add more classrooms, more teachers, and more international training. That growth cannot be paid for through tuition.

Although the government doesn’t want to control the schools directly, they impose Ministry of Education exams on all students. These exams are very different than international exams like the SAT. We must prepare for both. It’s not just a big problem for the administration at the schools, but also for the students. We’re trying to find a solution—maybe by focusing on the government exam in the twelfth year.

To help the schools spiritually, keep us in prayer in your churches. Pray for our schools and what’s going on in all of Iraq during the critical times we are going through.

Next, help us meet the needs resulting from the growth of the schools. Send us more teachers—more Colleens, Jeremiahs, Bobs—to help us fill the gap. We really need teachers who have the vision, background in classical education, and qualifications to help us. Then they can immediately begin teaching in the schools.

Another way is to help financially. We need money for scholarships, construction, and help with the costs of sending more Jeremiahs and Colleens.

If God will let me live to be 95 years old, I think I will see CSM graduates in government offices, hospitals, courts, schools—there to help their nation with their new lives. It will be a totally different nation. The

government, like CSM, will not have Islamic fundamentalist ideas—but will be reforming and reshaping their lives and beliefs.

I’m thinking of a ninth grade student who passed his exams with the highest marks. I had never met the boy, but I called to say “good job” and ask him what he wants to do in life. “You are Mr. Yousif?” he asked. “Yes,” I said. “I want to be like you and help my nation! You taught me that.”

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The Adullam Strategy

By George Grant

In 1824 the Glasgow Missionary Society founded the Lovedale mission station along the banks of the Tyumie tributary of the Keiskama River, deep in the Cape Province of South Africa. The hardy Scots Presbyterians who staffed the station devoted themselves almost entirely to evangelistic work for nearly four decades. Alas, their sacrificial efforts bore little fruit all that time and the Society was considering cutting their losses and closing Lovedale. In 1867 however, a young and ambitious Scottish educator, James Stewart (1831-1905) and his wife Mina Stewart (1841-1912), proposed turning the mission station into a mission school. The directors of the Society believed that such an enterprise was more than a little quixotic but gave him permission to try.

The Stewarts had arrived at Cape Town in South Africa some six years earlier in the company of Mary Livingstone, who was on her way back to the African Transvaal to join her pioneer missionary husband, David Livingstone. James and Mina intended to spend the rest of their lives working with the Livingstones in an effort to establish new industrial enterprises along the Mabotsa frontier on the headwaters of the Limpopo River.

Like Livingstone, James believed he was called to help “open up” Africa’s interior to the broader influences of Western civilization. Once that occurred, he was certain that commerce and Christianity would work hand-in-hand to end the evils of slave trading, tribal warfare, and primitive barbarism. After several wrenching false starts however, he began to doubt that industry could succeed and he was plunged