



A President in Prison: Reflections by President Najla Kassab

From the pulpit of Luther to a mattress in a prison in Iraq is the path to justice.

In a solidarity visit to the Presbyterian churches in Iraq, the wife of the pastor in Kirkuk surprised me with her request if I could join her in a visit to a women's prison, where the church has a ministry. I had heard about prison ministry before from other churches but was never part of it.

As a Lebanese I was given a special permission to join the church in this visit. We had to wake up around 6:30 in the morning and were picked up by a special car of a person in charge of the prison who took us to visit the prisoners. We wanted to meet a woman from the community who was prisoned lately and the wife of the pastor knew her before.

The church prepared some food that we took to the prison, and it seems that there is a trust relationship between the church and the people in charge of the prison. The pastor and his wife did tell me extensively about this ministry and how the church was taking care of the basic needs for the women.

We entered the prison, and the lady known by the church was asked to come out and meet us in the office of the director of the prison. She was sentenced to around year and a half. As she saw us she broke into tears. We had some time of sharing and hearing her story. Then I was asked if I am ready to go into the prison cell. I said yes and entered the cell where 36 women were put in one small room. They were young women who were sentenced with different crimes, but what adds to the difficult situation are the five kids who were in the cell and were delivered by other women prisoners, walking around the mothers. They were born due to sexual abuse of these young women. The church brought some milk and diapers to the children and sweets that the kids and prisoners enjoy.

The prisoners welcomed me and asked me to sit on the mattress on the floor near them. They accepted me as one of them even for a few minutes. Sitting near them raised in my mind many questions of injustice that women face. Each woman has a story. I sat there trying to cheer up their sad faces. Their worried eyes showed how hard it is to reach their troubled souls. The church in Kirkuk was the sign of hope to them even in small steps like providing doors for three bathrooms that are part of the small room or an air-conditioner that makes summer easier for these women. With the limited resources the church in Kirkuk has, they were ready to retain

some dignity to these struggling women or to the five kids who will one day recognize that they were born in prison, and they share the injustice that their mothers faced.

This visit was real nourishment for my journey for justice, as the president of a communion that strives for justice. I just discovered through the eyes of these women and children how hard we have to work to really deserve the title "committed to justice." I just discovered how standing in the pulpit of Luther was a triggering experience that echoed Luther's words, "here I stand," and now here I stand in jail with women who paid great price, and children who will bear the scar of the prison even when they did no crime. Here I stand with churches of Iraq, a struggling remnant that paid a great price.

Still the struggling church in Iraq remains a sign of hope for a better future; better future for the kids who were happy to receive the sweets and whose play ground is the cell of the prison. Probably one day they will play in real play grounds like the children of the world.

Our visit to Iraq was an affirmation that we will stand with the struggling church and will learn to be a sign of hope in the unexpected places, even when that meant between the walls of a prison and on mattress.