

## Teaching Christians For Life

Project(s): 00-514, 00-794, 41-694, 48-344, 54-817, 65-420, 65-589

Country/Region: Holy Land, Pakistan, Sudan, Turkey

Four Iraqi Christian youngsters, now refugees in Syria, describe how important it is for them to be able to study in a Christian environment. Traumatized by their experiences in Iraq, and strangers in a foreign land, they find security, love and acceptance amongst Christian teachers and Christian classmates, as well as the precious opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the Bible and the Christian faith.

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### Facing a terrible choice

But sometimes there are no free government schools. Then very poor Christian parents may face the terrible

“We were obliged to leave Iraq because of the severe war and personal attacks on our family ... We were introduced to this [Christian] school since arrival in Syria and we love it since we feel we are at home. We feel happy and play normally with all the other local students without feeling strangers. We love our school; we love our teachers as if we are among our family. At this school they teach us prayers and songs and hymns and we love them all, apart from mathematics which is very difficult, and we do our best to learn.”

“I have been to another school but I recently transferred to this [Christian] school because they don't accuse me of being an Iraqi student ... I am happy with my classmates and others, playing a lot of games together. I don't fear my friends here, they are so good to me. No one pushes me down or says bad words ... I have no enemies here, like the other school.”

“I prefer to go to a Christian school to hear the Bible stories and have the Bible thoughts. So I don't want to go to any other school which will not teach me about Jesus.”

“I am going to a Christian school because they are polite students and all the teachers treat me with respect and don't beat me or shout.”

### Why Christians long for Christian schools

The Iraqi Christian youngsters in Syria are fortunate because they are able to attend private Christian schools, with help from Barnabas Fund. But many Christian children in other faith contexts have no option but to attend the free or very cheap government schools. This can be a very hard experience if their teachers and classmates are contemptuous of or hostile to Christians. In places such as Egypt or Pakistan, Christian pupils may be marked down in exams or even failed, simply because they are Christians.

The Christian children also have to cope with an education that may have a major focus on learning Islam while it mocks and caricatures Christianity. It is easy to

understand why an education for their children in a Christian environment is often the foremost desire of many Christian parents living as minorities in other-faith contexts.

“Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.” Deuteronomy 4:9



choice of educating their children in another faith school or not at all. Muslims in Mauritius have been offering children of other faiths an education at an Islamic school, complete with free uniforms, free transport, and free food. The impoverished



Last year more than 140 children obtained an excellent Christian education at this school in Bethlehem supported by Barnabas

parents are told, "Don't worry, you can keep your faith, but your children will belong to us." In other places it can be even more blatant. For example, in South Africa, an Islamic pre-school provides education, uniforms and meals, all free of charge if the children will convert to Islam.

Sometimes the danger is concealed. In the very poor Chin region of Burma (Myanmar), Christians as young as 11 are lured away from their parents by the offer of a good education. Instead, they find themselves in a Buddhist monastery, their heads shaved, forced to train as novice monks. Some never see their parents again.

There are times when depriving a Christian child of an education is used as a way of persecuting them or their parents. Even in Communist countries, such as Laos, denying the children an education can be used as a punishment for Christians. In Cuba two women who left the Communist Party because they had become Christians were threatened with likely negative consequences for the future studies of their children. In China a teenage boy, Chen Le, who refused to renounce his Christian faith was expelled from his school and forbidden to take the entrance exam required for college.

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## When Islam is the door to education

In some countries all school-children, no matter what their own faith, are required to demonstrate a level of expertise in Islam before they can progress through the education system. In Pakistan Islamic Studies is compulsory at school, and failure to achieve the necessary grades in this subject would prevent a pupil from gaining a place at university. Islamic studies are also a required part of many university courses, whatever the religious background of the student. In Padang, the capital of West Sumatra, Indonesia, the tests start even earlier: in 2008 an ordinance was passed that students moving up from elementary to high school were to take written and oral tests on the Qur'an.

## Access to education for Christians

A solid education can be the starting point for employment and a good future, while a poor education can lead to a life of illiteracy and poverty. This is easily perpetuated, as illiterate adults are usually locked into poorly paid jobs, earning so little money they can barely support themselves, let alone their families. Lack of money means parents cannot afford the school fees for their children or must even send them out to work. The children grow up illiterate like their parents, and the cycle of poverty and illiteracy continues.

In many places where Christians are a despised minority it can be even more difficult for them to break out of the cycle, as anti-Christian discrimination makes it harder for them to find decent jobs or get promotion.

"Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it."

Proverbs 22:6

Education, preferably in a Christian environment, is therefore vital in poor Christian communities, bringing positive change. Good schooling can offer a future to children who would otherwise languish in poverty, and it can transform a whole Christian community, as a generation of well-educated Christians will be a source of professional skills and financial resources.

Where children can also receive solid Christian teaching, they will grow up strong in their faith to face discrimination or persecution without wavering. It is from such children that the next generation of pastors and evangelists will come.

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## Barnabas Fund helping Christian children

Barnabas Fund is seeking to strengthen the Church through the education of Christian children and young people. Our School-Place Sponsorship Fund (*project reference 00-514*) supports 5,391 Christian children in 24 Christian schooling projects in Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Sudan, Kenya and the Holy Land. Needy Christian children can be offered free or almost free places because Barnabas Fund is contributing to the running costs and provides items that they need, such as books and uniforms.

Another project, Christian Schools for Christian Children (*project reference 00-794*), has a broader scope and can meet any kind of need that helps Christian children to get an education in a Christian environment. This can be building new classrooms, providing equipment or even training Christian teachers.

These projects bring Christian children joy for the present and hope for the future. Take the case of Umar in Pakistan. Umar had polio when he was six, which permanently damaged one leg. Because of his disability he was bullied at school and eventually refused to go any more. The pastor suggested to his parents that they should send him to a Christian school. Being very poor they had never even dreamt of this, because they could not afford the fees. But because of aid from Barnabas, the school could offer Umar a free place.



Umar, who has flourished during his education at a Christian school in Pakistan

At first Umar was depressed and silent at his new school, but he soon discovered that the teachers and students were accepting of him. To his delight, Umar's fellow students were also Christian – previously, he had been the only Christian child in his class. He made friends with the other students, and the teachers encouraged him in class. Three years on, he is getting good grades and is seldom absent. Umar says, "At one time, I stopped everything and thought that as a lame person I could not do anything. But my school principal and teachers were always very supportive of me." Umar hopes to become a teacher himself to help "children who are depressed and have lost their hope".

During the Sudanese civil war (1983- 2005), an entire generation of young people from the mainly Christian South missed the opportunity to gain an education. Barnabas Fund supports a number of school projects for Sudanese Christian refugee children in Sudan itself and in neighbouring Egypt. The children receive education in all core subjects and get a nutritious meal each day. If there was nothing to eat at school they would have to skip classes to go scavenging to find food. Many of them are orphans or were separated from their parents by the chaos of the civil war. At school, the children are also taught about Jesus Christ and the Bible by teachers who provide a loving, Christian influence, helping them deal with the trauma of their war experiences and giving them hope for the future. In addition, the schools receive assistance in equipping their buildings, including items such as a water pump and fans for the classrooms to help keep the children cool so they can concentrate better in the intense summer heat. (*Project reference 48-344*)

In the Holy Land Barnabas has built a Christian school in Bethlehem and continues to help with the running costs. This means that the school can accept any child from a Christian family, no matter how poor the parents are. The school can charge only nominal fees or, in cases of extreme poverty, sometimes nothing at all. This is so important in Bethlehem, where Christians are suffering high unemployment. In the last academic year, the generous donations of supporters enabled over 140 children to get an excellent

Christian education at the school. The school, which also provides full-time or part-time jobs for 17 Christians, has an outstanding reputation for the quality of its education and its happy, loving atmosphere. (*Project reference 65-420*)

And when they have left school? Barnabas is involved in the education and training of tertiary-level Christian students. In India we are helping to pay for the training of 27 students who have gained places to study nursing, pharmacy and technical trades. These young people are the children of pastors who were particular targets of the anti-Christian violence in Orissa state in 2007-8; even in the refugee camps where many Christians settled the pastors found they were still in danger and had to find shelter with Christian families in cities far from home. It is hoped that these children will be able to go back later to their home area to live, work and witness there once they have learnt their vocational skills. (*Project reference 21-723*)

In Turkey we are supporting ten young people from poor Christian families to attend university (project reference 54- 817), while in Pakistan 18 students are receiving assistance to study for degrees in IT, maths, medicine, engineering, dentistry and a range of other subjects (*project reference 41-694*). We also support students in the Holy Land. (*Project reference 65-589*)

Our thanks go to Barnabas Fund's supporters who, through their generosity, give hope to so many needy Christian families by enabling their children to get an education in a Christian environment.

**Please remember in your prayers all those Christian families who are striving to break the cycle of poverty and despair.**