

The Cradle of Our Faith

A teacher's outline

For use in conjunction with the booklet



The seven countries profiled in this study span two continents and vast stretches of geography. The Christians who live in the Middle East today are the “living stones” of the early Church: a vital, dynamic presence in a region that is both the cradle of ancient civilization and the site of contemporary geopolitical developments that affect us all. For centuries, the Middle East has been home to numerous religious and ethnic groups, including diverse sects of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, often living in close proximity and with a degree of harmony and mutual tolerance not seen in Europe during the same period.

At its roots, Christianity is an Eastern religion, born and matured in the Middle East. The great diversity of Christian peoples, sects, and denominations in the Middle East is a testament to the fact that the region has been a vitally important corridor among empires throughout the centuries. It is also a testament to the diversity of the peoples who have chosen to follow in the steps of Christ and his apostles who opened up the faith to the whole world.

Now, after two millennia of continuous presence, Christianity is on the decline in its birthplace. The Christian communities of Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, and Syria have all experienced a dramatic decrease in numbers, shrinking in some countries to a mere 10% of their former size over the last century. These are communities that trace their roots to the first century of Christianity.

I. Introduction

- A. Diversity of region in ethnicity and religion
- B. Eastern roots of Christianity
 - 1. mid-east churches have become symbols of the west
 - bear the brunt of retaliation
- C. Effects of various superpowers over the centuries
 - 1. Decline of Christian presence
 - 2. Christian Exodus throughout region
 - 3. Witnessing the beginning of the end of Christianity in its birthplace
- D. Political turmoil
 - 1. Effect of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire
 - 2. Emerging sovereign states
 - Palestine not given sovereignty like other countries
 - 3. Recent history
- E. PCUSA mission
- F. Prayers for the region (6 in booklet intro)

II. Syria

- A. Fact box
- B. Syria's modern day role for Christians of entire region
 - 1. Become safe haven
 - Provided safety for Armenians a century ago
 - Today, secular gov't : Christians participate fully in society
 - 2. Various Christian denominations
- C. Connection to Biblical Era & New Testament

- 1. Use of Aramaic liturgy
- 2. Connections to Paul the Apostle
- D. Rich Archaeological sites
 - 1. Roman, Byzantine, Muslim
- E. Prayers

III. Lebanon

- A. Fact Box
- B. History lesson
 - 1. Lebanon created by French out of Syrian territory
 - to provide a Christian nation in region
 - Christians now a minority; Sunni & Shi'a presence grown
 - 2. Civil War '75-'90 (can be a stand alone lesson)
 - Maronite's role
 - Palestinian Refugees
 - Hezbollah, then and now
- C. Theology and Origin of Maronites
 - 1. Council of Chalcedon
 - East/West schism & eventual reunification with Rome
- D. PCUSA mission & history in area
 - 1. NEST & MECC
- E. Prayers

IV. Jordan

- A. Fact Box
- B. Old Testament Connections
 - 1. Archaeology & Scripture
- C. Roman Era and surrender to Islam
 - 1. Crusades

- D. Ottoman Rule
 - 1. Ending in British Mandate
 - Establishment of Hashemite Kingdom
 - > Christian society today
- E. Refugee influx/burden – Christian & Muslim
 - 1. Palestinian – since 1948
 - 2. Iraqi – since 2003
- F. Prayers

V. Iran

- A. Fact Box
- B. Christian Presence since Pentecost
 - 1. Qara Kelissa & the Disciple Jude
- C. Armenian Christians – largest Christian Community
 - 1. Ancient Cultural ties with Iran
 - Large influx in 1606 & after Genocide of 1915
- D. Assyrian Christians (Nestorians)
 - 1. Spread from Iran into China
- E. Protestant Christians
 - 1. Arrival of Presbyterian Missionaries
 - Engaging with locals
 - > Schools, Churches, hospitals
 - 2. Converts from Islam
 - Conditions for religions after Islam
- F. Prayers

VI. Israel/Palestine

- A. Fact Box
- B. Birthplace of Christianity
 - 1. Biblical connections
 - Galilee area (Israel proper)
 - > Jesus' ministry
 - Bethlehem area (West Bank)
 - > Birthplace of Jesus
 - Jerusalem – sacred city to 3 world religions
 - > Site of the Resurrection
- C. Birth of Israel (this segment could be a stand alone lesson)
 - 1. A secular Zionist dream leads to a Jewish nation (not secular)
 - Obstacles to Peace
 - > Refugees, settlements, water rights, 'security fence'/Wall, sharing Jerusalem
- D. Palestinian life as 2nd class citizen
 - 1. Muslims & Christians living with fewer rights than Jewish citizens
 - 2. Christians live as 'double minority'
 - A minority under Jewish control
 - A minority within own Palestinian society

- > With Muslim brothers and sisters
 - Endure unique hardships in Middle East rooted in Israeli/Palestinian Conflict
- E. Palestinians: A tale of two lands
 - 1. Palestinians who are Israeli citizens
 - Live in Israel proper
 - 2. Palestinians who live under Israeli Occupation
 - In Gaza, West Bank
- F. PCUSA mission with partner churches
 - 1. Dwindling Christian communities in the Galilee and in West Bank
 - Numbers leading to extinction
- G. Prayers

VII. Iraq

- A. The land where the Bible begins
 - 1. Old Testament connections (can be a stand alone lesson)
 - Scripture and archaeology
- B. The Assyrian Christians & Chaldeans
 - 1. The Church of the East
 - split at Council of Ephesus, 431AD
 - > Nestorians contributions and their influences to East and West
- C. Birth of the nation of Iraq
 - 1. Collapse of the Ottoman Empire, British Mandate, Saddam Hussein
 - Story of Christians under each rule
- D. Effects of current war
 - 1. Mass Exodus of Christians since 2003 war began
 - To Jordan & Syria and further afield for those who can
- E. PCUSA mission and history in area
- F. Prayers

VIII. Egypt

- A. Fact Box
- B. History/Origins
 - 1. Old & New Testament connections
 - 2. Origins of Monastic Traditions
 - Various ancient monasteries
 - > St. Francis in Egypt
 - 3. The role of Alexandria in Christianity
- C. Christian presence since Mark, the Evangelist
 - 1. Largest number of Christians in Middle East
 - Various denominations
 - Coptic Church
 - > Present conditions for Christians
- D. PCUSA mission & partners
- E. Prayers

Discussion Questions

To be used with *The Cradle of Our Faith*



Egypt

1. What Middle East Country has the largest Christian community?
2. What is the largest Christian denomination in Egypt?
3. What are the differences in belief and practices among the following church denominations of the Middle East?
 - a. Coptic Catholic Church
 - b. Greek Orthodox Church
 - c. Armenian Orthodox Church
 - d. Syriac Orthodox Church
4. What does the word "Coptic" mean?
5. What significance does Alexandria, Egypt have for Christian history and art?
6. What brought an end to the Christian majority in Egypt?
7. Historically and at the present time how would you describe relations between Christians and Moslems in Egypt?
8. What is the involvement of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Egypt, historically and at present?
9. In what Middle East country did the monastic movement in Christianity begin?
10. By what name was the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) known in Egypt?
11. What does the term "Evangelical" mean to Christians of the Middle East?
12. What is the Byzantine Era and what are its dates?
13. What does the Coptic Orthodox patriarch, Pope Shenouda III, say about persecution of Middle Eastern Christians?
14. What is the size of Egypt and its population today and what are the principal religious groups and their relative sizes?
15. What Sultan of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria did Francis of Assisi meet and what was the outcome of his effort?

Israel/Palestine

1. What significance does Israel/Palestine have for the Christian Church?
2. How would you describe the present conditions of the Christians of Israel/Palestine and to what might those be attributed?
3. Cite the major highlights of the history of Israel/Palestine since the time of Jesus.
4. What is the status of Christians in Israel/Palestine today and historically?
5. What effect did the establishment of the State of Israel have on the Christians of the Holy Land?
 - a. What Israeli practices have had the greatest impact on Christians in Israel/Palestine, especially in the Occupied Palestinian Territories?
 - b. How have these practices affected the Christian population?
6. What are the current Christian denominations of Israel/Palestine?
7. What are the differences between the following Christian denominations of Israel/Palestine?
 - a. Greek Catholics (Melkite)
 - b. Greek Orthodox, Latin-rite Catholics
 - c. Maronites
 - d. Armenians
 - e. Copts
 - f. Syriac Orthodox
 - g. Anglicans
 - h. Lutherans
 - i. Other smaller congregations
8. Why are the Christians in Israel/Palestine considered a "double minority"?
9. What did the patriarchs of the various Christian denominations in Jerusalem have to say about the conditions of their congregation living in Israel/Palestine beginning in 1989?
 - a. What historical significance do their statements have?
10. In the "comity agreement" of the mid-nineteenth century among

Protestant missionaries, to what Middle East countries were Presbyterians to send missionaries?

- a. What effect did this agreement have on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s involvement in the religious activities of Israel/Palestine?
 - b. Who are the closest religious partners of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Israel/Palestine?
11. What are the areas of principal activity by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the Middle East?
 12. What historical religious sites was Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, responsible for having constructed?
 13. What effect did the Crusades that began in 1095 have on Israel/Palestine in the following centuries until the present time?
 14. Are current Israeli government actions fostering Christian life in Israel/Palestine or the exodus of Christians?

Jordan

1. What role did the Jordanian city of Madaba play in Christian Middle East history?
2. In what activities in Jordan did Christian crusaders engage and when and by whom were these activities ended?
3. What changes did Ottoman rule bring for Christianity in Jordan?
4. Under the present Jordanian Hashemite Kingdom, how would you describe current Christian-Moslem relations?
 - a. What are the factors that have contributed to these current relations?
5. Why is there such a large Palestinian refugee population relative to the total Jordanian population in Jordan?
6. What other large group of refugees are found in Jordan today?
7. What are the principal Christian denominations currently residing in Jordan?
8. What impact have the Christian Churches had on Jordanian society in modern times?
9. What roles did Jordan play in Hebrew history described in the Old Testament? Similarly for the beginnings of Jesus' teaching.
10. What is the principal river in this country? What significance does it have for the life of Jesus?

Lebanon

1. What was the stated reason for the creation of Lebanon by the French colonial rulers following WWI and why were the French involved in the Middle East at this time?
2. How did Lebanon's creation by the French result in conditions that led to the great Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990?
3. Describe the Lebanese power sharing arrangement for president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament?
4. What ancient cultural identity do Lebanese Christians claim?
5. What is the largest Christian denomination in Lebanon and what are its origins and history in Lebanon?
6. What is Monothelism and how does it differ from Nestorian doctrine? What Lebanese denomination adopted Monothelism?
 - a. What did the Council of Chalcedon of 451 AD (CE) attempt to achieve for Christian doctrine and church polity?
7. What is meant by Eastern and Western Christianity and what denominations belong to each?
 - a. When did the division arise and what effect did it have on the rise of Islam?
8. When did Presbyterian missionaries arrive in Lebanon and what effect did they have on the country's religious and cultural development?
9. Where is the home office of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and what role has it played in the Middle East?
10. What are the principal religious groups in Lebanon?
11. What impact did the Israel-Hezbollah war of the summer of 2006 have on Lebanon?
12. What prompted the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990 and the movement of Syrian forces into Lebanon in 1976 and the Israeli invasion of 1982?
 - a. What prompted the Lebanese Maronite-Israeli alliance against Moslems living in Lebanon?

13. Where do the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon currently reside and why?
14. What can you recall about the massacre of Palestinians in September 1982 at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon?
15. What were the objectives of Israel's occupying army and the Christian South Lebanon Army in southern Lebanon up to the early summer of 2000?
16. What prompted the rise of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and what effect did it have on both the Israel occupying army and the Christian South Lebanon Army?

Syria

1. Among the countries of the Arab Middle East and Iran, how does the Christian population in Syria rank?
2. What is the relative size of the Christian population of Syria?
3. What humanitarian role has Syria played for the peoples of the surrounding countries?
4. What are the principal Christian communions in Syria?
5. What is the Nestorian Church?
6. Who are the Arameans and what is their significance for modern day Syrians and Syrian Christians?
7. What are the largest Christian denominations in Syria?
8. Why is the Armenian Orthodox Church also referred to as the Jacobite Church?
9. Why is there such a large number of Armenian Christians in Syria?
10. What proportion of Syrian Christians participates in Syrian political and administrative affairs relative to Moslem Syrians and what might this indicate about relations between Christians and Moslems?
11. What evidence is there that the Moslem majority of Syria looks with favor on the Christians of Syria?
12. What significance does Syria have for Christian history?
13. How were the first Christians who fled to Damascus persecuted?
14. Who are the Circassians, Alawites, and Druze?

Iraq

1. What are the ancient kingdoms/empires that existed in the land of present-day Iraq?
2. Why is this land called the "Cradle of Civilization"?
3. Where did the opening stories of the Bible have their origins, geographically and culturally?
4. How long have Christians been present in the land now known as Iraq and what are the names of the early church denominations?
5. How did these early churches differ from one another in terms of belief and liturgy?
6. Who are the Nestorians, what are their distinct beliefs, when did they arise, and what are their contributions to Christian history and to our civilization?
7. What is the importance of the Moslem Abassid Caliphate to Christianity and Western civilization?
8. Who are the Jacobites and why are they so named?
9. In what ways did the Christian churches help to advance Islamic civilization?
10. What contributions did these Christian churches make to the medicine of the time of the Abassid Caliphate?
11. What brought an end to this flowering of civilization in the land of the cradle of civilization?
12. Who were the Mongols and who was their famous leader? What changes did they bring to Islamic civilization?
13. What remains of the Assyrian population that was largely responsible for this flowering of civilization?
14. Who are the Chaldeans and what religious affiliation do they maintain?
15. Biblically, what is the importance of the Aramaic language and to what liturgy language is it related?
16. What do Armenian and Assyrian Christians have in common?

17. After the demise of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, what country was responsible for forming the modern day nation of Iraq?
18. Why did the Assyrian Patriarch flee Iraq in the 1930's, eventually establishing his seat in Chicago?
18. What effect did Saddam Hussein's regime and its fall have on the Assyrians and the Christians of Iraq?
19. How has the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 affected the Christian population of Iraq?
20. In what countries have Iraqi Christians found refuge?
21. What would be the effect of the loss of the Christian population of Iraq on that country?
22. What role has the PC(USA) played in the Christianity of Iraq and when did this begin?
23. How many Presbyterian congregations exist in Iraq today and where is they located?
24. What are the Middle East Council of Churches and the Jinishian Memorial Program, where are they found outside of Iraq, and what are their functions?
25. For what is the Babylonian King Hammurabi known today and what is the significance of what he did for our civilization?

Iran

1. What peoples were among the first converts to Christianity in Jerusalem and when did this occur?
2. Who are the Persians and where are they found living today among Middle East countries?
3. What is the size of the Christian population in Iran today?
4. What ethnic group comprises the largest group of Christians in Iran today?
5. From where did the Armenian Christians of Iran first come, when and where did they settle?
6. Why in some Christian communities are the Armenian Christians of Iran sometimes considered the "Jews of the Christian world"?
7. When and where did the first split in Christianity occur and what Christian offshoot did the split produce?
8. What Christian community brought Christianity to China and when?
9. Also what Christians brought Christianity to India?
10. When did Protestant missionaries first arrive in what today is Iran and what contributions did they make to the Christian culture there?
11. How are Christians in Iran viewed in the context of an explicitly Islamic republic?
12. In contrast to ancient Christian churches, certain groups within the Protestant community of Iran are increasing in number despite the difficulties they encounter. Why might this be?
13. What was the percentage of Christians in Iran in 1975 and in 2000?
14. When did Iranian Christians begin emigrating in modern times and to where did they immigrate?
15. What according to Islamic law is the penalty for conversion from Islam to Christianity or other religion?
16. Which of the original twelve disciples of Jesus was martyred in what is now Iran, for what reason and by which church denomination is he considered its apostle?
17. Who are the Zoroastrians, Baha'is; Azeris, Gilakis, Mazandarani, Lors, Baluchs and Turkmen of Iran?
18. What church in present-day Iran was erected shortly after the ascension of Jesus, in 68 AD, and when was it destroyed and rebuilt? To whom is it dedicated?
19. What current Iranian city is almost exclusively Christian and is the seat of the Armenian Archbishops of Iran and India? When was it founded and by whom?