

Iraqi Alumni Give New Meaning to Loyalty and Hope

by Paul Hennessy



Michael Simonian of Dubai reminisces with his former teacher, Fr. John Banks, SJ, during the July 2004 Baghdad Reunion.

The enduring loyalty shown by the graduates of Baghdad College and Al-Hikma University would be the envy of any school in the world.

They have gathered in significant numbers every two years since 1977 to honor, celebrate, and support the mission of the Jesuits from the

New England Province who founded and administered the two schools for 37 years (1932-1969).

The reunion last July of 500+ alumni and family members at the Framingham Sheraton was a fitting and enthusiastic tribute to their indelible educational experiences, occurring as it did 37 years after the ouster of their alma maters from Iraq in 1969. They came with renewed hope for a rebirth of the schools they say played such an influential role in their lives. Baghdad College (BC) was a preparatory high school and Al-Hikma University (AH) opened in 1956 as a university with programs in engineering, business administration and liberal arts.

The optimism of these faithful alumni was stimulated in presentations about Iraq by Jesuits now living in Jordan and intent on returning to Baghdad. "I think we're coming to a time when this will either happen or it won't," said Fr. Alfred Hicks, SJ who taught at Baghdad College for four years in the 1960's and is now stationed at the Jesuit Center in Amman. "Nostalgia is nice, but let's think about the future. This is not for us or for you, it's for the kids of Baghdad and Iraq who are now running in the streets."

Some ideas Fr. Hicks suggested for how such a renaissance might occur ranged from grassroots efforts, involving making local contacts and procuring locations in Baghdad, to grand plans of soliciting aid from Jesuit colleges in the US to support new educational programs. Fr. Hicks was not shy about asking for support from alumni. "If any of you have a mansion to donate, we can use it," he said, evoking some laughter.

But Fr. Denis Como, SJ, whose career parallels Fr. Hicks' in teaching at Baghdad College and now in Amman, spoke of other obstacles that have since become even more apparent in the six months since the July 2004 reunion. "Restoring the schools doesn't require money as much as it does the healing of memories," he said to the Saturday morning audience. "There are a lot of people there with broken glass in their hearts that need to heal. Financial support or help from American universities won't work unless the people can let go, not just of Saddam Hussein, but also of the Ottoman Empire and their other failed rulers."

"The alumni are still family to us and they have never forgotten those who gave of themselves and their talents."

- Bro. Jim McDavitt, SJ

Determination to return to Baghdad—even the plan to have the "mother of all reunions" there in 2006—was echoed by many throughout the weekend. New England Provincial, Very Rev. Thomas J. Regan, SJ noted the inspiring loyalty of graduates for their schools that have not existed since being ousted by the Ba'athists in 1969. "The Jesuits are in it for the long haul," he said. "We've founded schools in difficult situations throughout history and we're committed to

the importance of the educational mission."

Sami Jihad (BC '53) supported that intent. "Our greatest dream is to rebuild Baghdad College and Al-Hikma in honor of the selfless dedication of the Jesuits who taught there," said Jihad. Now living in El Cajon, California, he is similar to many BC alumni who attribute their successful careers to the training they received and has sent a monthly donation to the Jesuits for all 47 years since he graduated from college.

The January '05 election, when millions of Iraqis voted despite security risks, underscored their intention to control their own destiny. Two BC alumni attending

the reunion and exemplifying such sense of purpose in Iraq were Wathiq Hindo, president of Neareast Resources, which employs some 11,000 of his fellow citizens in security and other diversified services, and Dr. Said Hakky, a urologist who is director of the nation's Ministry of Health.

"Baghdad College served all the people of Iraq from north to south, rich and poor," said Hindo. "We're very optimistic we can get those schools back."

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Several generations of the Hindo family gather for a family photo.



The Province Mission in Iraq: Now and in the Future

When can we hope to begin again our New England mission in Iraq? And what can we do once we start anew our mission? The answers to these questions depend on developments in the country following the elections, when we work out a new constitution and form a new government.

We certainly cannot begin our joint work in the country before the establishment of a strong and stable government, which can give us the green light for our safety and security, especially as Americans. Meanwhile, four of us, Frs. Al Hicks, Denis Como, Simon Smith and I live in hope, and we are in a spiritual state of readiness to begin our new mission in Iraq.

We started the formal process for getting back our two institutions, Baghdad College and Al-Hikma University. In due course, we hope to begin running these institutions, especially Baghdad College. We will depend on our alumni, both inside and outside the country. We also need to work on different levels with the local clergy and religious, through personal visits, lectures, retreats and spiritual direction.

Our people will need special personal care to cope with the new situation in the country. Finally, we certainly need the moral and financial support of our friends to help us move on to an unknown future.

*Fr. Clarence Burby, SJ
Amman: February 10, '05
Fr. Burby, SJ, is a native-born Iraqi and New England Province Jesuit.*

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Seated (L-R) Mary Jane Sheena, Fr. Provincial Tom Regan, SJ, Ramzi & Marcelle Hermiz. Standing (L-R) Sabah (Peter) Sheena and daughter, Mary Catherine, and Bro. Jim McDavitt, SJ.



(L-R) Fr. Denis Como, SJ, Fr. Clarence Burby, SJ, Wathiq Hindo, and Fr. Al Hicks, SJ.



The Baghdad College "Old Timers" — as they call themselves—proudly sing their high school song.

Hakky, (BC '61) a top advisor to both the provisional government and the Red Cross, spoke of even more glowing prospects when he said "With the will of God, Iraq will become a great power in the Middle East."

Brother James P. McDavitt, SJ, who has been the key Jesuit organizing the reunions over the years, continues to be amazed by the outpouring of support from alumni. "The reunions are clearly a collective labor of love," he noted. "The alumni are still family to us and they have never forgotten those who gave of themselves and their talents. We will be dedicating an entire wing of our new Ambulatory at Campion Center in thanksgiving for their generous gifts over the years."

All proceeds from the reunion after expenses go to support the retirement and care of the 'Baghdadi Jesuits' at Campion Center as well as worldwide Jesuit educational projects. The last two reunions have raised more than \$100,000 each for these purposes, and a poignant part of the weekend festivities was a caravan of alumni going to visit their former Jesuit teachers at Campion.

Coming all the way from Dubai for such a visit was Michael Simonian (BC '64) general manager for Kodak in the Middle East. It was the first reunion he had attended and the first he had seen of his classmates in 40 years. He was able to spend some time at Campion Center with Fr. John P. Banks, SJ, a teacher he fondly recalled, and was surprised to later learn that Fr. Banks died in his sleep that night.

"The passing of our dear Fr. Banks is very hard to believe," Simonian wrote after hearing the sad news. "Fr. Banks must have felt that his mission was accomplished in seeing us grown up to fatherhood ourselves, coming from the other side of the globe to see him."

Gratitude for the contributions of the 143 Jesuits who collectively served at Baghdad College during its 37-year history was a common theme throughout the weekend. The tireless efforts by all involved, but notably by longtime coordinators Ramzi Hermiz (BC '48) and his wife, Marcelle, and Dave Nona (BC '64) and his wife, Kholoud, is testimony to the somewhat improbable bond that formed between young Iraqis and New England Jesuits.

As Fr. Hicks described his first meetings with his BC students, "They didn't know English. I didn't know Arabic and I didn't know how to teach. This is a perfect place to be, I thought, and it all worked out. That certainly shows the power of hope and we need that now."

A book titled *Jesuits by the Tigris* by Fr. Joseph F. MacDonnell, SJ, who taught physics and math for eight years at BC and AH in the fifties and sixties, describes the history of the schools, and the rich learning experience that created

lifetime friendships between students and their teachers. He quotes Wael Hindo (BC'60, AH '64), brother of Wathiq Hindo, who summarizes the connections then and throughout nearly four decades of reunions by saying:

"The purpose of the reunions is to respect and honor the Jesuits who spent their youth in Iraq educating us, caring for us and praying for us. Besides a quality education, I gained discipline, a deepening of faith in God, and hope."

There's that word again. Perhaps the seeds of hope planted long ago in the hearts and minds of those schooled at Baghdad College and Al-Hikma University will help grow Iraq's new freedom. ✚