

“We can’t go back as long as we know we are not secure”



Archbishop Antje Jackelen of the Church of Sweden visits Ashti camp in Ankawa, Kurdistan region of Iraq. © Paul Jeffrey/WCC

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Upon her first visit to Iraq, Antje Jackelén, archbishop of the Church of Sweden, had the same questions as many others across the world: “What’s really happening? What can we do to help our Christian brothers and sisters? What can we do to also assist other communities under huge pressure?”

As part of a delegation of church leaders coordinated by the World Council of Churches, Jackelén’s visit to Iraq focused on the future of vulnerable people in the country following the expected military defeat of what has come to be called the Islamic State. Jackelén, along with others in the delegation, are urging intentional donors to come together to immediately support efforts to secure, stabilize and rebuild communities so that people can go home.

In Iraq, Jackelén met with government officials, church leaders and internally displaced people, thousands of whom live in refugee camps.

“I worshiped together with a community that is displaced, and I met a group of youth,” said Jackelén. “Of course the messages are not all consistent: what would you expect in a situation in which so much trauma is a reality, in which so much suffering has happened and where so much is unsolved and unresolved?”

She was grateful for an opportunity to walk alongside people living in refugee camps. “People living there were very open and very helpful to me in telling their stories. It’s in a sense amazing to see how people can adapt to extreme situations and still make something good out of it.”

They spoke of their hope to be able to return to their villages. “They said, ‘We can’t go back as long as we know we are not secure,’ “relayed Jackelén.

Often, it is difficult to cultivate hope in such circumstances, she added. “When we talked to the youth, I realized that they are very much struggling with the questions: is there a future for us in this country? What are our opportunities to get work and to really experience equal citizenship?”

Young people were divided, she said, some them saying, ‘No, there is no future for us here,’ and others asking, ‘But what would this country be without us?’

Jackelén and the rest of the delegation came to understand that there are enormous demands on the political leadership and the church leadership in Iraq. “I would wish that the church leadership really would feel that they are supported by the Christian community worldwide, not only in prayer - as important as that is - but also in deeds,” she said. “When we worshipped together, it was obvious that in spite of the different languages we speak, in spite of these very, very different experiences we have, there is something that binds us together in the language of worship, in the sharing of the bread, in the sharing of each other’s company.”

Jackelén returns home with a lasting memory of the words spoken by some women in a refugee camp. “They were saying, ‘It is our faith that holds us up. It is our faith that makes us live day by day.’ ”

[Photos from the Church leaders' visit to Iraq, available free of charge](#)

[WCC delegation seeks secure future for religious minorities in Iraq](#)

[Study shows religious and ethnic diversity vital for peace in Iraq and Syria](#)

[The WCC and NCA report "The protection needs of minorities from Syria and Iraq"](#)