

The Nestorian faithful: Assyrian and Chaldean churches

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

I had the opportunity to meet members of one of the world's oldest and most heroic churches recently when I spoke to the national youth conference of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East. The meeting was held, of all places, in San Jose, California.

Now there is no reason why Assyrians—as they call themselves—should not meet in San Jose or any of the other American cities where they have a presence. San Jose, though, is so associated with the technological cutting edge that it was slightly jarring to be there engaging a church that harks back to the earliest years of the Jesus movement and to eras when the church still had a powerfully Semitic character.

San Jose is home to a church dedicated to Mar Yosip, which is the name of St. Joseph (San Jose) in the form that might have been used by the Syriac Fathers. Throughout that church's liturgy one repeatedly hears words that might be more at home in a Hebrew context, such as the Syriac forms of *ruach* (spirit) and *kadosh* (holy). Your mind keeps slipping from Silicon Valley to the eastern marches of a still-vibrant Roman Empire.

These Assyrians are more than just Iraqi exiles. They are what Western churches have pejoratively labeled Nestorians—followers of a patriarch of Constantinople whose christological views were declared heretical in 431.

Whether or not the name Nestorian is valid historically (and Assyrians never accept it), history has made the name glorious. Nestorians were members of the great Church of the East that flourished in Mesopotamia and Persia in the later Roman Empire, and that formally declared its independence from the Orthodox/ Catholic world in 498. The Nestorian faithful led one of the greatest missionary ventures in Christian history; by 800 their church extended deep into Central and Eastern Asia and was firmly rooted in southern India. Perhaps a quarter of all Christians adhered to the Nestorian tradition.

The church fell into a steep decline during the later Middle Ages, and it vanished entirely in what had been its Asian strongholds. Although Indian Christians continued unmolested, they kept only sporadic contact with the church in Mesopotamia, modern Iraq. By the 16th century, the Church of the East split into two communions, divided over the issue of loyalty to the Roman papacy. Those who accepted Roman authority became the Chaldean church; the Assyrians remained independent.

In modern times these divisions seemed unimportant compared to the external persecutions inflicted on both groups by oppressive regimes and terrorist movements, from the Ottoman Empire through the Iraqi state of the 1930s and the Islamist extremism of the past decade. Only days after the San Jose conference, the media were reporting new bomb attacks against Iraq's Chaldean Catholic churches.

Today, the ancient Church of the East has only a tiny fraction of its former strength. Although statistics are uncertain, there are probably only 1.5 million members of the Chaldean and Assyrian churches combined (not counting the Thomas Christians of India). But if these churches are down, they are not out. Despite all the crises and persecutions—in fact, because of those disasters—both churches are highly international, with at least some representation in the many countries where migrants have set up home.

These are classic diaspora churches, which serve as living examples of the words of Hebrews: here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come. The current catholicos/patriarch of the Assyrian church makes his home in Morton Grove, Illinois. Assyrian clergy and faithful can be found in England, Sweden and Australia, while a determined core of believers maintains a stubborn resistance on the Assyrian Plain of northern Iraq. In Iran, a tiny community of Assyrian Christians has a guaranteed seat in the nation's parliament.

Compared to the booming churches of Africa and Latin America, these old Syriac churches might seem marginal or even irrelevant (though after encountering the enthusiasm of their younger members I find it hard to see their churches as failing). But even in decline, the Assyrian and Chaldean churches inspire awe, as they represent a direct link to the oldest Christian world. Observing these believers makes me ponder how some churches rise over the millennia while others fade and decline. Imagine journalists in a distant future reporting on the last surviving congregation of Methodists or on the shrinking communities of diehard Catholics.