
Antioch

An article for the *Cathedral Times* by the Very Rev. Sam Candler

In October of 2002, a year after 9/11, I set out with about 45 other pilgrims on a unique trip. We were the first group of "World Pilgrims" from Atlanta, consisting of 15 Christians, 15 Jews, and 15 Muslims. About half of us were white, and about half of us were people of color. The idea was that we would visit the holy places of each others' traditions. Each night, our hotel roommate would be someone from a different religion. On each long bus ride, our seatmate would be someone from a different religion. With the energy and enthusiasm of our organizer, Wayne Smith, it was a memorable pilgrimage, and the first of many. That first pilgrimage was to Turkey. After changing planes in Istanbul, we flew to Adana. From there, we took our first bus trip to a town called Antakya, our first site.

Do you know where the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians?" It is one of the most frequent questions on popular Bible quizzes. The answer is "Antioch." According to the Book of Acts, 11:26, the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. After Barnabas retrieved Saul (Paul) from Tarsus, Barnabas took Paul to Antioch, and the community of Christians grew. Along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, Antioch was in that region of what is now the southeastern tip of Turkey, next to Syria and above Lebanon. It was from Antioch that Paul systematically began all three of his famous missionary journeys. Later, Antioch would become one of the five great centers of Christianity, the pentarchy that included Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. The great early Church patriarch, Saint John Chrysostom, was from Antioch.

But, Antioch is now called Antakya. As World Pilgrims, our first inter-religious stop was at Antakya, a mostly Muslim community in the province of Hatay which has historically enjoyed generous relationships with the Christians there and the few Jews. The city was our introduction to inter-religious pilgrimage, and I will never forget it.

Thus, a few weeks ago, I was crushed to realize that Antakya was among the cities most devastated by the earthquake of February 6, 2023. Last week, Jared Malsin and Elvan Kivilcim wrote a beautiful, if tragic, description of Antakya and its destruction in [an article in The Wall Street Journal of March 3, 2023](#). I highly recommend the piece, titled, "Ancient Antioch Survived Many Disasters in its 24,000 Years –Then Turkey's Earthquake Obliterated It." Here is some of what they wrote:

The near-total destruction of Antakya is a devastating blow for Turkey and the wider Middle East. Home to Turkish Muslims, Christians and Jews, the city sustained an Old World multiculturalism and sense of interreligious solidarity that has faded elsewhere during a century of nationalist rule in modern Turkey and decades of colonial war and sectarian militancy across the Middle East.

Even before the 2011 uprising and civil war in Syria that pushed more than three million refugees to settle in Turkey, many residents of Hatay province spoke both Turkish and Arabic, unique in a country where President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and many other elites are proudly monolingual.

"We grew up all in the same streets. Nobody said this is Christian, this is Muslim, this is Alewite, this is Sunni," said Cemil Baklaci, a 32-year-old engineer from Antakya, who is Arab and a member of the Alevi branch of Islam. "If I had been born in the next house over, I'd be Christian," he said, walking amid the ruined home of Antakya's old city last week.

With those writers, I lament the devastation. I am sad that 69-year-old Josef Naseh, a Syrian Christian archaeologist mentioned in the article, has had to leave Antakya with these words: "The real devastation this earthquake created is in our minds. ...We need new people who can carry on the mythology, the faith, the culture in this land. ...We need people who will not erase all that."

Indeed, the world needs those kinds of people. May God be with the people of Antakya. Disasters happen. Earthquakes happen. Hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires. I pray for the World Pilgrims among us, all over the world, who find the courage and strength to live on, and to build again communities of good faith. Wherever we are, and no matter what has befallen us, we can still seek good faith and the common good. God is surely with us in those endeavors.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip