

WALK... ...With them



STORIES, PRAYERS AND STUDIES
FOR YOUR SPONSORED WALK



Open Doors

1. HOW TO USE THESE ELEMENTS

Thank you for planning a sponsored walk to raise money for Christians across Iraq and Syria who have lost everything due to war and terror*.

Any good walk will need some breaks - time to grab some water, a bit of food and a chance to give your feet a rest. But breaks are also a time to chat and reflect on why you're spending the day, or night, walking. These are times when we can remember those we are raising money for, share their stories, briefly looking at the Bible and praying for change.

How long your walk is will depend on how many stops you have - but these simple sessions are based on a ten mile hike, with stops every two and a half miles - just about once an hour.

We'd suggest you have a specific leader for hosting these times. They can be the same person each time, or a different leader for each. The sessions aren't supposed to be excessively long or overly interactive. These are just simple breathers, reminders and pointers back to God and to our persecuted church family who we're trying to raise money, prayer and awareness for.

Print out the stories and take them with you, or download the files to your phone to help you lead these short sessions.

2. BEFORE YOU START

If you want to make this walk interactive and strengthen the connection between those taking part and their persecuted family, then do the following:

Ask everyone to bring one or two important personal possessions with them. This is for one of the group break/discussion times. The items have to be able to fit in their rucksacks, and be something they are willing to carry with them on the journey, so nothing too heavy or bulky. They should put themselves in the shoes of those who fled Islamic State (IS) soldiers back in 2014. Ask people: "If you could only take two things with you as you fled home, what would they be?" Get them to bring those with them and ask them to be prepared to explain their decision during one of the break times.

**The stories in this guide all relate to Iraq, but money raised will be used by our partners in both Iraq and Syria! The crisis in Syria has displaced around 6 million people inside the country whilst another 4.8 million are refugees outside Syria. The church is caught in the middle of a brutal war, with extremist groups actively targeting Christians. But, through our partners, we're helping the church continue to survive and shine God's love to all Syrians.*

3. FIRST BREAK TELL THE STORY

Get the group to sit down. The purpose of this first break is to remind people what they are walking for. It's about telling the story of the thousands of Christians that were forced to flee their homes in Iraq in the summer of 2014 as soldiers from Islamic State approached. As you listen and discuss, make sure you pass around water or encourage people to get their drinks out.

EXPLAIN THE DANGER

Read this section to your group:

Syria and Iraq have been in turmoil for several years. Syria's civil war began as a popular uprising against the government, whereas neighbouring Iraq has seen security and safety decline throughout the 2000s due to various wars. Among various factions and sides, one particular group has emerged to claim many headlines. The so-called Islamic State (or IS) are an extremist Islamic terror group that has taken advantage of the chaos in Iraq and Syria and seized control of large portions of land from both governments. In doing so, they declared a caliphate, or Islamic kingdom, that they ruled with a strict, brutal interpretation of Islamic Law. This has sometimes resulted in public hangings and horrific deaths for those accused of breaking the law, or insulting Islamic faith.

As the group began to seize control of various areas, Christians were understandably worried. In Iraq in particular, since the 2003 war ended, half of the Christians in the country have left due to increasing extremism and the targeting of Christians.



THE DAY IT HAPPENED

Get someone from the group to read this quote from a resident of Mosul, who fled to the safer city of Erbil, northern Iraq:

“For five days there was heavy fighting on the other side of the river Tigris. I lived on the left-bank (in Mosul). On our side it was relatively calm, but of course we were afraid.

“Of the five bridges that cross the Tigris, only one bridge was operational. The rest were taken down, because Islamic State soldiers feared the Iraqi army would bring in reinforcements. However, to all our surprise, suddenly the Iraqi army withdrew. The rumours spread very quickly through phone and social media. Many Muslims in my neighbourhood stayed, but especially Christians wanted to leave the city. Despite the curfew, we packed our car with the most valuable things and left.

“The way to Erbil normally takes about one hour, but it took us 12. There were four checkpoints, but especially the first one at Kalak took long. For eight hours we waited in lines of about three miles. The two-way road had become one-way direction and the cars were about 10 or 12 lines wide; six lines on the roads and another six lines on the sides of the road.

“Later I had contact with my former neighbour. He told me that in 50 minutes after we left, the neighbourhood was taken over by Islamic State.”

WHAT HAPPENED TO THOSE THAT STAYED?

Read this to your group:

When Islamic State soldiers took over Mosul, there were still some Christians in the city. Some were too old to travel, some too stubborn – they'd lived through wars and fled their homes often – why should they have to again?

But this time it was different. Islamic State were vicious. Christians were singled out. Followers of Jesus were told to leave, convert to a strict form of Islam, pay a high ‘Christian’ protection tax or die. Buildings and homes belonging to Christians were marked with the Arabic letter ‘N’, standing for Nazarene or Christian. It was a derogatory term, and a way of identifying those that Islamic State wanted to get rid of.

At checkpoints, property registration documents were taken or ripped up by Islamic State soldiers. Homes that were left empty became owned by Islamic State. Those leaving the city were stopped at checkpoints, where almost everything aside from the clothes people were wearing – including phones, jewellery and even medicines – were taken. One Christian reported that his young son was made to hand over his pocket money, which amounted to 18 pence.

For those who stayed there were rumours of forced conversions, brutal punishments and deaths. The whereabouts of some who chose to stay is still unknown.

Get someone to read this story:

A family with four small children, three-to-nine years-old, living in Mosul were planning on leaving the following morning, but as they ate dinner, two homes next to them were hit with rocket propelled grenades and set on fire.

“We left the food and ran,” the wife said. “We didn’t even stop for our shoes, we fled in our sandals! The children were very scared.”

They had very little credit on their mobile phones, and all the shops were closed. But they managed to connect with four other families and co-ordinate to leave together for Erbil. They were first going to hide in the basement, but then decided to flee at around 10pm that night.

Soldiers on the street said they would have to walk because they couldn’t take their car – it was too late, Islamic State had already come to the area. The soldiers were not to allow people to leave... but they didn’t stop them.

“There were lots of families walking, everyone was moving, it was crowded in the streets in the middle of the night,” explained the family. They saw dead bodies on the streets. Bodies of soldiers and policemen; “We learned that just a half-hour after we left home, Islamic State came to our area.

“Now there are zero Christians in Mosul. It was bad before, but never like this...”

Get someone to read this quote from a Iraqi church leader:

“There are thousands of displaced Christians who have fled with nothing but their clothes, some of them on foot, to reach the Kurdistan region. This is a humanitarian disaster. The churches are occupied, their crosses were taken down.”

Get someone from the group to read this short story:

A young family of five were attempting to flee Mosul when they were stripped of nearly all their possessions at an Islamic State checkpoint, including clothes for their children. The mother said: “They stole our car with everything I had brought for my children – their clothes, a washing machine, food, medicine, jewellery for the girls. I hid my wedding ring in the diaper of my 10-month-old baby, but they took my new phone.

“My 80-year-old father in law got angry and demanded they return our things but they said to him: ‘Do not speak or we are going to hurt you’. As they were taking our car I managed to grab two bags of the girls’ clothes and then we ran away.”

Continued...

Spend a while reflecting on these stories. Ask the group these questions:

- Had you heard these stories before? Were you aware of what happened?
- How do these stories make you feel?
- Imagine having to leave everything because people who disagreed with your faith and beliefs were coming. Would you leave everything and keep your faith in tact?
- Where would you go to find safety?
- Could you still sing of God's goodness even when banished from your home?
- We may never experience the fear and trauma that our church family in Iraq and Syria have lived through. But, as the church, we are all part of one body, and when one part suffers, we all do. This walk is about sharing in their journey. It's about understanding, connecting, praying and doing something about it. It's about changing our attitudes to our relationship with God, our view of His church and His world.
- Do we really know what following Jesus costs?
- Would we still follow him if we knew it might bring harm and turmoil?

PRAY

Before you head off on the next portion of your walk, spend some time praying. Either designate one or two people to lead prayers or let the group pray openly. Cover the following points:

- Pray for those still unable to return home. Many are stuck in northern Iraq. They can't leave the country, but can't go back to their towns. Those towns that have been liberated are largely devastated. Pray they find strength and courage. Ask that God would help them settle and integrate into new places. Pray for work, employment and safety. Pray for rebuilding and those thinking of returning to their ruined homes.
- Pray for those still struggling from the trauma and pain of leaving. Many will know someone who has died, others will have seen horrific things. Ask that God would bring healing.
- Many of the Christians who fled found safety and help in churches in Erbil, northern Iraq. Pray for these churches and their leaders. Ask God that they would be able to adapt to keep on helping and serving all the people in their communities, meeting needs in whatever ways they can.

4. SECOND BREAK SHARE YOUR POSSESSIONS:

During this break point we'll try and make the stories we heard in the previous reflection seem a little closer to home.

As you listen and discuss, make sure you pass around water or encourage people to get their drinks out.

Get everyone to sit in a circle. Ask each person to show the group the one or two possessions they chose to bring with them. Get each person to explain why that thing was important.

- **Why did they choose to bring it?**
- **What does it mean to them?**
- **Why could they not live without it?**

Once everyone has had a turn, explain some of the things that people who fled their homes chose to take with them. There are also some things people wish, in hindsight, that they had taken:

WHAT PEOPLE TOOK

As many fled quickly, with little warning, they packed what came to mind:

Laptops / Smart phones: Not only would these be essential for people who work in office/admin roles, but they also helped people to stay in touch with family and friends and to get updates on what is happening. Facebook, Twitter and instant messaging might seem like a good bit of fun, but as people fled, these social networking services became essential ways for people to stay in touch – and to keep informed.

Clothes and bedding: Generally they only packed for a few days or weeks. Many people didn't think

they'd be gone for long so they grabbed a few things to keep them warm, and some spares. As they weren't sure how long the journey to Erbil would take, some took blankets and bedding with them to help them rest and sleep on the journey.

Photos: Though we all have access to recent photos on our computers, we still frame pictures to put on the walls of our homes. Photos are full of precious memories and many wouldn't ever want to leave them behind.

WHAT PEOPLE REGRET NOT TAKING

Many people thought they would only be leaving home for a few days or weeks at most, so some didn't think about taking these important things:

Passports: As the wars in Iraq and Syria have unfolded, millions have left the region altogether. But many don't have the financial means to leave, and many others don't even have important travel documentation, like a passport, as they left them behind. This can make proving who you say you are quite hard – and leaving the country even harder.

Exam/education and employment certificates: Many of those who fled were not too different from you and me. Mosul was Iraq's second-largest city. It would have been relatively wealthy, and many people would have been employed in skilled jobs, with a decent education. But whether they are now in the safety of northern Iraq or have sought refuge in another country, if you can't prove your work or education history, life can get extremely tough. Without these certificates it's hard for potential university students to prove what grades they achieved, or for workers to show that they have the experience and skills for a particular job.

Continued...

A 70 year old handwritten Bible: A Christian man, now living in Erbil, regrets not taking his Father's handwritten Bible with him. In the rush he didn't have space to take it, and though he now has a new Bible, the old personal handwritten version of the book would have been an incredible reminder of his family's Christian history in a time of such upheaval.

ASMAA'S STORY

Get one of the group to read Asmaa's story:

"After we left, Islamic State raided our house and took everything that was of value. We heard from our neighbours that the rebels threw our family photos in the street to get trampled on in the dust. It feels as if on that day all my hopes and dreams also got trampled on.

"What I miss most are my baby pictures and the gifts my friends had just given me for my 15th birthday. There is no future for us in Iraq. All my dreams are gone. Our hope is now to get to a country where I will be able to study and have a better life.

"I really miss my friends in Iraq. I am glad that we can keep in touch through Facebook, but still it is difficult. I realise I might never see them again in real life."

Spend a few minutes chatting through the following questions:

- Ask the group if, in light of this, any of them would want to change what they chose to bring with them on the walk?
- If so, why, and what would they bring?

- How should we view our possessions and the things we're fortunate enough to own?
- Are we guilty of giving them too much importance?
- Do we sometimes look for value and purpose in having more and owning more – do we put these things in place of a relationship with God?

PRAY

Before you head off again, spend more time praying. Either designate one or two people to lead prayers or let the group pray openly. Cover the following points:

- Say sorry to God for when we value our possessions more than Him. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you appreciate His amazing love so that nothing could take His place in our hearts.
- Pray for those who lost everything when they fled. Ask that God would meet their needs. Pray that they would keep their faith despite all the world has thrown at them.
- Pray for hope and a future for those that have fled. Ask that those who left school or university would be able to complete their studies, and that others would be able to find work.

5. THIRD BREAK

REFLECT ON GOD'S WORD / PRAY

The story of the Bible is the story of a refugee people. The defining moment in the journey of the early Israelites is when God leads them out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land – their new home. But even once they get there, for large parts of the Old and New Testaments, that home is under threat.

Through prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Amos, God warns his people that the nation of Israel is in trouble. Eventually the nation falls, and the book of Daniel tells the story of a time when the brightest and best Israelites are serving a foreign king in a foreign land. When Jesus arrives on the scene, Israel has been occupied again, only this time it's being ruled by the Romans.

That means the Bible has a lot to say to us about home – and specifically where we can find our true home. And this is something that those who have lost everything have begun to discover.

READ PSALM 84

- **Does anyone know this Psalm? Anyone recognise the words from worship songs?**
- **What is the Psalm saying? What is the writer on about?**
The Psalm has been written by someone far from the temple in Jerusalem – the focus of Israelite worship of God. He refers to the 'courts of the Lord' (v2), the 'altar' and the 'house of the Lord' where people worship God. The writer was far from this place of worship – a place he felt was home – and he's longing to get back there – that's why he mentions the pilgrimage or journey to get back (v5-7).

- **What was special about the temple? Why does he want to be there?**
It's where people believed God's presence was focused. It's where they could experience God and feel close to him.
- **But is this just about a physical place we can go to worship? Is there more to it than that? Is God limited to being in just one spot?**
When Jesus died some weird stuff happened. Rocks spilt open, dead men came back to life and a curtain was torn in two (Matthew 27:50-52). That curtain was in the temple – the place this Psalm we're looking at was talking about. The curtain would separate the most holy place – where God's presence was thought to reside – from the rest of the people. When it split in two, that space was open, anyone could enter.
- **If God isn't found in one place, what does it mean to say that 'Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere?'**
This isn't simply about heaven and everything being ok when we die. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can know that God is with us in our own lives, no matter where we are or what we are going through. Jesus said the Kingdom of God is in our midst – in some translations it says the Kingdom of God is inside you (Luke 17:21). The passage is a reminder that a relationship with God, and time spent in His love and grace, is better than anything else.
- **Re-read the Psalm. What else sticks out to you? How can you begin to make your 'home' in God? What does that mean for you now today, and what would it look like to live out?**

Continued...

Get someone from the group to read

Martin's story:

Martin was a trainee church leader from a town near Mosul called Karamles. Back in 2014, on the night he fled home he managed to scramble together a few possessions including his phone. Since then, he's finished his training and he's been leading a community of displaced people. He's just 24. When given the chance to leave, Martin chose to stay in Iraq – he knows where his true home and security can be found.

"We have our prayers and services in exactly the same way as we did in Karamles. So in this way we remember our church and village. Of course, I desire to go back to my church, the place I grew up in. But if I'm called to serve in the desert, I can still serve there. From sand I can make a church.

"Sometimes I think: 'How can I still be here while so many people are leaving. Who will I serve? Will I just serve the walls of the church, just buildings?'

"This continuing situation has just solidified my calling. I am needed here at this moment to feed my people with charity and with hope.

"They know that my family isn't here and that I could choose to emigrate to be with my family. I could go to the USA and live a rich and peaceful life. But despite the situation, I have decided to follow my calling and stay in Iraq, with them. That gives them hope."

Martin said this in an interview back in 2014. At the end of 2016 Karamles was liberated, but the town has been largely destroyed. As yet, very few have

returned home because so many homes have been ruined. Martin continues to help those who are displaced, serving God whilst exiled from his home.

Get someone from the group to read this quote:

"We had to leave everything behind. I only took a bag of clothes and I grabbed my Bible. Jesus and his Word are the only ones staying. We lost all our possessions, but we haven't lost Jesus."

Lujah, a 70 year old Iraqi Christian.

REFLECT

Psalm 84 challenges us to find our home and security, and to put our longings and passions, into God. We often long for the latest iPhone – or the end of our exams. We find our security living in a safe, Western country, with a nice house, decent education and the potential for a good job. **Is this Psalm, and the stories of those who have lost everything fleeing Islamic State, challenging us to get more serious about our faith?**

PRAY

Before you head on your way spend a while praying. Use the Psalm as your basis, and focus on the following:

- Pray that those unable to return home would find their security and home in God. Pray they would know what it would be like to 'spend one day in God's courts' and ask that they would continue to trust and hope in Him.
- Think about the things that get in the way of us finding our hope, strength and security in God. Pray for God's spirit to help you be able to say with Lujah, 'we have lost all our possessions, but we haven't lost Jesus'.

As you walk the last section of the journey, encourage the group to think about the Psalm and the stories they've heard. Get them to think about where they put their security and their hope. Is it in God? If not, why? What's stopping them?





Open Doors is an international ministry serving persecuted Christians and churches worldwide. In response to the crisis in both Iraq and neighbouring Syria, we've launched a global seven-year campaign, *Hope for the Middle East*, to stand with the church in the region during this time of unprecedented persecution. We supply Bibles, leadership training, literacy programmes, livelihood support and advocacy services. We also seek to mobilise the church in the UK & Ireland to serve Christians living under religious persecution.

Open Doors UK

PO Box 6, Witney,
Oxon, OX29 6WG
+44 (0)1993 460015
inspire@opendoorsuk.org

Open Doors Ireland

PO Box 873,
Belfast, BT15 1WZ
+44 (0)28 9075 1080
odireland@opendoorsuk.org

Open Doors Scotland

PO Box 8515,
Prestwick, KA9 9AN
+44 (0)1292 800006
odscotland@opendoorsuk.org

**Open Doors**

60 years of serving persecuted Christians

www.opendoorsuk.org
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