



# Open*Doors* magazine

60 years of serving persecuted Christians

September 2016

# SAVE ME

BRING HOPE TO THE MIDDLE EAST

CAMPAIGN LAUNCH  
SPECIAL



## COULD YOUR CHURCH BECOME A PARTNER CHURCH?

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## Letter from Lisa: Cheers!



Open Doors is an international ministry serving persecuted Christians and churches worldwide.

Open Doors supplies 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.

If you have any questions about the work of Open Doors, or would like to reprint any of the articles in this magazine, please do get in touch.

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Summer often creates significant memories for us, with holidays and, this year, the Olympics. But it's a memorable time for Christians in Iraq for more serious reasons. Two years ago, thousands were forced to flee Mosul due to the threat of so-called Islamic State. Most are still in portacabins, living on a shoestring; the war in Syria, too, continues with no apparent end in sight.

Nevertheless, God has not abandoned His people. By His Spirit, and thanks to the care and concern of supporters, our partners there have for many years been able to train and strengthen our persecuted family. The conflict of the past five years, however, has highlighted the need to prioritise emergency aid and it's thanks to the generosity of all who responded to 2013's *Save Syria* campaign and last year's emergency appeal for Syria and Iraq, as well as those who've committed to regular giving, that 27,000 displaced families are receiving monthly food relief.

But now the church in Syria and Iraq is entering a new season. Restoration, rebuilding and renewal are within their sights and they need to be prepared. They are praying that the next few years will be a time of positive transformation: that peace and stability will be restored, and people are able to return home. But they need us, their family in Christ, to stand with them and implore the God of mercy for His strength to make that happen.

Many brave pastors have lived sacrificially for some while now, at considerable cost to their health

*"Save us, O Lord our God."*

Psalm 106:47

and emotional strength. Trainee pastor Martin, staying in Iraq when so many have left. Pastor Edward, serving 2,000 families in Damascus, wondering if he can carry on. They need to know that Christians here are right behind them, giving them the support they need to continue their vital work.

Running the London Marathon earlier this year, it meant so much to have people cheering me on. At 18 miles, I was wondering whether I could make it to the end, when I heard a voice in the crowd shouting: "Come on, Lisa! Power!" That roar of encouragement gave me the impetus to reach for the finishing line. If Christians in Syria and Iraq see us cheering them on, praying for them, speaking up for them, and supporting them practically, it will strengthen them for the years ahead.

That's why, this month, Open Doors is launching a seven-year global campaign to bring hope to the Middle East. I urge you to read it prayerfully, asking God how you can be involved. The global petition is particularly exciting, with a chance for the church across the world to speak together as one voice. But the call to consider what the next seven years hold for each one of us is exciting, too. What might God do through us, as we offer ourselves to Him?

*Lisa*

Lisa Pearce  
CEO, Open Doors UK&I



# WORLD WATCH NEWS

## NIGERIA: Assistant pastor died as martyr

**An assistant pastor who died while preaching the gospel has been described as a martyr at her funeral on 23 July.**

Eunice Elisha (43), mother-of-seven and wife to Pastor Olowale Elisha, had been preaching on the streets near the Kubwa region, Abuja, when she was killed by unknown assailants.

That morning, her sons learned through friends that a woman had been killed whilst preaching. They urged their father to inquire at the police station, where he then identified his wife's body.

"I broke down and cried," said Olowale. "I lost my true companion."

Speaking to local media, Olowale described his wife as a zealous Christian: "[She] was committed to anything that was of God... I see her as a martyr who died for Christ."

Despite his loss, Olowale has said that he is ready to forgive his wife's attackers. "My prayer is that if they can accept Christ it will be a gain for Christ."

He has also testified to finding comfort in God's Word. "My encouragement has been Colossians 1:27, which says, 'Christ in you, the hope of all glory'. Yes, I know that my wife has died, but I know I am not alone. Christ is with me and He lives in me."

"I want to thank Open Doors for the support and the encouraging words you brought to me. You do not know me, but you came to identify with me in my time of sorrow. May God continue to bless your ministry!"

**Open Doors is running a letter-writing campaign for the Elisha family. To send messages of encouragement, please visit [www.opendoorsuk.org/write](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/write)**

### • PRAY

- Thank God for Eunice's courageous ministry and legacy
- Ask God to comfort Olowale and the children
- That Eunice's attackers would come to know Christ.



Eunice Elisha

## UPDATE: Imprisoned Sudanese brothers appear in court

**Thank you so much for praying for Mr Abdulmonem, Pastor Hassan Taour and Pastor Kuwa Shamal, who remain imprisoned in poor conditions. After eight months in limbo, they finally appeared in court for a pro-forma hearing on 4 August.**

As we went to print, their next hearing had been scheduled for 14 August. While charges against the church leaders remain officially 'unknown', the National Intelligence and Security Service have indicated that they will be prosecuted for crimes against the state. The men are suffering from cramped conditions, a poor diet and health problems.



### • PRAY

- Ask God to sustain these men and their families through this ordeal
- That they would be granted justice.

Sources: MEC, CSW



Pastor Hassan Taour (LEFT) and Pastor Kuwa Shamal (ABOVE) and Mr Abdulmonem (NOT PICTURED) remain imprisoned.



"My wife died preaching the gospel... She always made sure that she shared the Word of God with at least one person every day."

- Pastor Olowale Elisha, Nigeria

## VIETNAM: New believer beaten for refusing to give up faith

**A Vietnamese Christian has been beaten by a policeman and a group of about 20 youths until they thought he was dead after he refused to give up his faith.**

Donh\* and his wife are from a village where the locals practise sacrificial ritual ceremonies. When they decided to follow Jesus a year ago, Donh refused to participate in the rituals. This angered the villagers. Local authorities also began to keep tabs on Donh and

his family.

Our local partner Cang\* says, "They destroyed his house, savaged his crops, and kicked him out of the village. But despite being treated like that, he continued not only in keeping his faith, but he shared it with his relatives. Three families related to Donh then became Christians."

A week later, the heads of those three families were called to the police station and told to give

up their faith in Christ. When they refused, the police also beat them.

The attack has caused Donh to flee the village with his family.

### • PRAY

- For healing for Donh, who is experiencing frequent headaches following the beating
- For protection for Christians in Vietnam.

\*Name changed for security reasons

## RUSSIA: Christians speak out against anti-religion law

**Christians in Russia have spoken out against a new law which will restrict the activities of Christians who are not part of the Orthodox Church.**

The new law, known as the 'Yarovaya' law after one of its authors, was signed into law on 7 July. Officially, it is described as an 'anti-terrorism' measure as it

allows the government to monitor extremist groups.

However, its biggest impact may be upon Russia's Christians; religious activity will only be allowed to take place inside registered buildings, meaning the 'house churches' will be deemed illegal, and missionaries will need a permit to operate. The law is unlikely to affect the Russian

Orthodox Church, but will affect all other evangelical groups and denominations.

### • PRAY

- For wisdom for Russia's Christians in responding to this law
- That the kingdom of God will continue to advance in Russia, despite these restrictions.

## UPDATE: Iranian prisoner ends hunger strike

**Christian prisoner Maryam Naghash Zargaran has ended her recent hunger strike.**

She began the hunger strike on 5 July, to demand her 'immediate and unconditional release' in view of the inadequate treatment she had received for her long-standing health issues. Prison officials examined Maryam on 20 July and provided a medical report confirming the seriousness of her condition, but her demand for release was denied by an Iranian court at the request of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS).

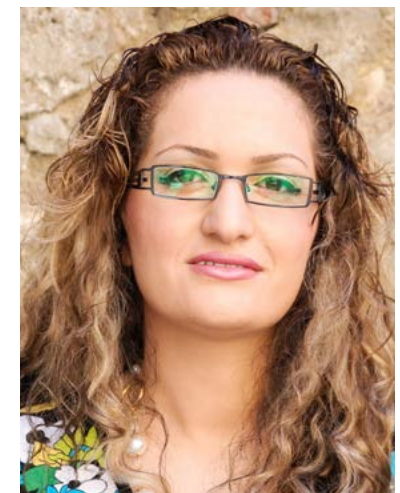
Maryam, who was granted medical furlough for a range of health issues in June 2016

following a previous hunger strike, returned to Evin Prison, Tehran on 27 June to continue serving a four-year prison sentence on charges of 'acting against national security'.

You can read more about prisoners in Iran and how you can speak out on their behalf on p19.

### • PRAY

- For healing and strength for Maryam and encouragement for her family
- That those responsible for blocking Maryam's request for release will have a change of heart
- That Maryam will be released from prison soon.



Maryam Naghash Zargaran

Source: MEC



A photograph of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a grey jacket, holding a young child with curly hair. The child is looking towards the camera with a serious expression. In the background, several other people, including women and children, are sitting on the floor, some looking towards the camera and others looking away. The scene appears to be indoors, possibly in a community center or a place of worship.

# SAVE ME

BRING HOPE TO THE MIDDLE EAST

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Islamic extremists are intent on eradicating the church in the Middle East, but many courageous Christians are determined to stay and serve their communities, and believe they have a vital role to play in rebuilding their nations. They need us, their global church family, to put vital resources in their hands, and to raise our voices in prayer and speak out to those in power on their behalf.

This is why Open Doors is launching a global, seven-year campaign to mobilise Christians around the world to bring hope to the Middle East – and we need you and your church to be a part of it.





*Pastor Edward and his wife Rana are key Open Doors partners in Syria*

### Light in the darkness

"A bomb fell on our roof and Rana and myself were inside our apartment. If that bomb went through the ceiling we both definitely would have been killed."

For Pastor Edward, who leads a church in Damascus, Syria, this could have been the moment that he decided to leave. Many others have; out of the 1.8 million Christians who were in Syria before the start of the civil war, it is estimated that over 1 million have left.

Alongside the civil war which has now been raging in Syria for over five years, there is a war within a war – the war waged by Islamic extremists against the church. Most infamously, the self-proclaimed Islamic State has claimed parts of Syria for its 'caliphate' and made the Syrian city of Raqqa its capital; other extremist groups have also subjected Christians to intimidation and kidnappings.

But Pastor Edward and his wife Rana are just two of the many Christians who are choosing to stay to support their communities and hold out the hope of the gospel in Syria, despite the very real dangers they face. Pastor Edward says: "I feel that I am privileged to bring the only message of hope to people who are in desperation – they need that message of hope."

The church in Syria is one of the oldest in the world; it was on the road to Damascus that the apostle Paul first encountered Jesus. Christians have made a significant contribution to Syrian



*Pastor Edward and his team distributing vital aid*

society throughout the centuries, in areas such as healthcare, education and business. Pastor Edward says, "It's very important and meaningful for us as Middle Eastern people to see the church stay to do the work of Christ here, like a light in the darkness."

**"I am privileged to bring the only message of hope to people who are in desperation"**

Today, the church continues to have a huge impact in Syria. Pastor Edward's church is helping 2,000 displaced families – around 10,000 people – every month with vital support, including food, hygiene kits and rent subsidies. Many of these families are simply too poor or unwell to leave.

One family that Pastor Edward's church is supporting fled the town of Idlib when Islamic extremists took over. Pastor Edward says, "They just left their home and their city in the middle of the night, and they came all the way to Damascus with their young daughter and they came with nothing, just with their clothes. The church really is the supporting hand of Jesus that is touching their pain and their needs."

### From the beginning

Open Doors started working through local partners in Syria before the war began, when tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees began arriving in Syria after the Iraq war in 2003. "From day one, before our crisis, Open Doors was a great supporter for the work of the church in purchasing any number of Bibles that we needed, and in supporting Iraqi refugees," Pastor Edward says.

Roger\*, the Open Doors worker in charge of coordinating our work through local churches and partners in Syria, says, "The church in Syria had a lot of freedom, so as Open Doors we had no need to work in the country in the years before. But with the coming of so many Iraqi refugees, the situation asked for a response and we decided to help the Syrian church to help these refugees."

**"We see how important these first years in Syria have been to build a network of relations with many denominations in the country."**

"Soon we started also to support the Syrian church with Bibles, Christian literature and with training. No one of course knew by then what would happen in the near future in Syria. Now, several years later with the war in Syria, we see how important these first years in Syria have been to build a network of relations with many denominations in the country."

This proved to be a marvellous act of God's providence. Building those networks of contacts enabled Open Doors to act quickly when the civil war began. Pastor Edward says, "When the crisis started in our country, Open Doors was one of the first organisations that really supported our church and other churches in the country, wherever they see the church has a capacity to help people and to make a difference in their lives."

Thanks to the generous long-term giving of Open Doors supporters, the work of Open Doors partners in Syria has grown hugely, and they are now supporting 12,000 families – around

60,000 people – with vital aid such as food and medicines. Open Doors partners are also investing in long-term projects, such as loans for small businesses, trauma care, and safe spaces for children. This work is only possible thanks to the faithful, sacrificial giving of people like you.

Prayer is also a vital support to the church in Syria. Many churches here in the UK and Ireland held prayer vigils for 'Night Lights for Syria' in 2013, or as part of our emergency appeal for Syria and Iraq last year. Our church family in Syria really believe that your prayers make a difference. Pastor Edward says, "We are really dependent on prayer. We feel the support when others are praying for us."

In 2013, ten years after Open Doors first began working in Syria through local partners, over 300,000 people signed the Open Doors *Save Syria* petition, which led the UN to recognise the suffering faced by Christians in Syria. Speaking out on behalf of our church family continues to be incredibly important. Pastor Edward says: "Open Doors gives voice to Christians in the area which is really so helpful. They are representing the church in my country and working on our behalf. Open Doors is really



*Rooms full of aid for Syrian refugees in Pastor Edward's church, Damascus, provided by the gifts of Open Doors supporters*

\*Name changed for security reasons





Picture drawn by Elias, a Syrian boy, during an event for children in Pastor Edward's church

bringing our cause as loud as possible. We really thank God and appreciate what they do."

### For as long as it takes

This picture was drawn by Elias\*, a Syrian boy in Pastor Edward's church. Pastor Edward says, "We had a big event for children and we wanted them to express their feelings through painting. All they wanted to paint was blood, fighting. What broke my heart was that a few of them just painted their own school with bombs coming in."

Open Doors is supporting projects to help children like Elias; in Aleppo, one of our partners provided clothes for 420 children. In Homs, another partner is running a child-friendly space that supports 320 children each week, a space where children can receive the attention they need and have a safe place to play. Our partner there tells us: "Though some of the previous staff fled to Europe, the project coordinator has chosen to remain in Syria along with the rest of his team for the sake of the children that they are serving."

Many Christians like this team are desperate to stay, and do not want to be seen simply as victims of the war, but to play their part in rebuilding their nation. One Syrian church leader has told us, "Please do not speak about us as a beleaguered minority; we consider ourselves as part of the silent majority that wants to live together peacefully in the region."

The global church cannot stand by while extremists attempt to destroy the church in the Middle East, or leave our brothers and sisters who are faithfully serving their communities to battle on alone. They need our support to keep going. Pastor Edward says, "Sometimes I feel I cannot go on anymore. But thankfully God by his grace is really empowering us in an amazingly divine way. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are keeping on and every day we are even more hopeful than the previous day. Every time we go into the church and we see new people coming in we feel that this is a great opportunity."

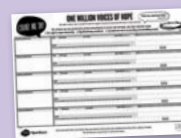
*\*Name changed for security reasons*



### JOIN WITH ONE MILLION VOICES OF HOPE

**This campaign is different from Open Doors' previous campaigns. We are mobilising the church around the world, from Brazil to Australia, as well as in parts of the world where Christians face persecution, such as Nigeria and China, to unite with their church family in the Middle East and raise one million voices of hope.**

"We have seen the encouragement value of persecuted Christians showing solidarity with one another," says one of our workers in Africa. "The moment persecuted Christians hear that Christians facing similar difficulties are praying for them and standing with them, they are deeply encouraged. It is such a poignant illustration of the Body of Christ functioning as it should."



Please sign the One Million Voices petition, which we have sent with this magazine, and take it to your church and ask others to sign it. Open Doors spent eight months consulting with church leaders and Christians in Syria and Iraq to ensure that the voices of Christians in the Middle East are heard through this petition, and it will be presented to the UN in June 2017.

### GIVE TO KEEP HOPE ALIVE

This year we are aiming to raise £2 million here in the UK and Ireland to support Christians in Syria and Iraq. This will not only help our brothers and sisters simply to survive, with vital aid such as food and medicines, but also to invest in long-term projects, such as trauma care for children like Elias, training for leaders like Pastor Edward and Rana, and loans for small businesses.

**Every £42 (£57)** can provide a food and hygiene pack for a family of five for a month in Syria or Iraq\*

**Every £69 (£93)** can provide half a day's trauma training in a safe location for a church leader

### PRAY AS NEVER BEFORE

We are also calling on the church to pray as never before. Our vision is to see 4,000 churches here in the UK and Ireland holding a prayer event for Syria and Iraq this autumn and we have produced a great *Pray for ME* pack to help you. Find out how your church can take part on page 12.

**Go to [www.opendoorsuk.org/SaveME](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/SaveME) to find out how you can give, pray and speak out to bring hope to the Middle East.**

\*These packs now provide essential supplementary food and hygiene items. The content and cost of a pack differ slightly between Syria and Iraq, depending on supply of goods and local needs.

# PRAY FOR ME

## BRING HOPE TO THE MIDDLE EAST

Christians in Syria and Iraq need our prayers more than ever before and Sunday 20 November, the International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church, provides us with a great opportunity to bring them hope.

Back in May, after some particularly bloody weeks of bombardment, Christians in Aleppo

called for an International Day of Prayer and were encouraged by the response of the church worldwide. Aleppo has borne the brunt of violence this year causing tens of thousands to flee. Despite this, the churches have been keen to play an important role in relief work and trauma counselling.

"The truth is that JESUS HAS RISEN," declared one believer. "We are refusing to see death any more in Syria – Aleppo especially – and we are declaring the resurrection of the Christ on our beloved country."

Sarah, one of the organisers, was also encouraged personally that day by seeing a friend in his 20s surrender his life to Jesus: "This boy is now thinking of staying in Syria because he believes he has a message for the country."

Pastor Edward had a message, too, which he shared with UK church leaders earlier this year: "Nehemiah wept. He mourned. He fasted for days. And he prayed. And I thought, his story is very helpful for us. We have the same situation (in Syria). We have broken down walls in our country. We have gates that are burned in fire... By God's grace, and by your prayers, the God of heaven will give us success. We His servants will arise and build."

Making time to pray for Christians in Syria and Iraq has huge benefits for the church here,



Girl in Dohuk, northern Iraq

too. After the day of prayer, Karen from the UK, wrote:

"I want to thank our persecuted brothers and sisters for the inspiration that they are to us, and to me in particular. Tell them how their faith challenges me... (and) what a tremendous inspiration they are to seek His face always. Their names are written in eternity and mine with them (Malachi 3:13). What a privilege that is."

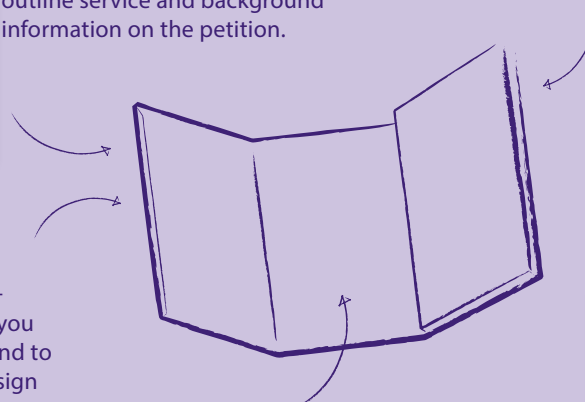
### Pray for ME pack

Your church can be a herald of hope! This pack gives you everything you need to pray, petition and provide for your persecuted family in Syria and Iraq.



#### Event Guide

You'll be well prepared with this Event Guide which gives ideas on how to plan your event from start to finish. It also includes a suggested outline service and background information on the petition.



#### Petition

Christians in the Middle East are asking us to speak up to governments on their behalf for equality, dignity and responsibility. Encourage people to join with thousands of Christians worldwide by signing the petition at your prayer event. There's one copy of the petition in the pack but you can order more.



#### Posters

There are two double-sided posters to help you promote your event and to encourage people to sign the petition.

#### Save ME DVD

This has four short films:

1. *Pray for ME* – show this in advance of your event
2. *Save ME* – show this at your *Pray for ME* event
3. Praying for hard situations – a bonus feature from Pete Greig of 24/7prayer
4. Brother Andrew – Prayer



#### Response leaflets

You don't need to be Superman to make a difference to our persecuted family and these leaflets show how. You'll need enough leaflets for each person at your *Pray for ME* event. We've put **ten** in the pack but you can order more.

### 1 Save the date

Talk to your church leader and make a date for your church to pray for the Middle East, either as part of a service, or at a special *Pray for ME* event. This year's International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church falls on 20 November, but pick another date if that works better for you. Advent, which begins the following Sunday, is a season of yearning and expectation, so could be a good time, too.

### 2 Order your *Pray for ME* pack

To order a copy – and any additional petitions, DVDs or response leaflets – please return the response form enclosed in your magazine, phone **01993 460015** or email **inspire@opendoorsuk.org**

### 3 Take it to your church

Whether you plan your prayer event to take place by day or night, inside or outside, creative or traditional in style, thank you for bringing your family together before our Father: the only one with the power to rescue and restore.





## YOUR GIFTS: BRINGING 'HOPE AGAIN'

The fantastic response of supporters to last year's emergency appeal for Iraq and Syria is enabling Open Doors to continue to support 15,000 families in Iraq every month with essentials like food parcels, long-term shelter and micro-loans. But standing with our persecuted family doesn't only mean catering for their practical needs. Through local partners Open Doors is also providing university-level pastoral training courses to equip believers to restore hope to young people who have been displaced from their homes.

*Martin (TOP RIGHT) on a group outing with some of the young Iraqis he supports*



*Martin teaches young people at a camp for displaced people in Erbil*

**Youth leader Martin (25) could have left Iraq and joined his family in America after so-called Islamic State (IS) militants overran his village, Karamles, two years ago. But he has chosen to stay to serve his displaced community.**

Martin fled to Erbil in Kurdish-controlled Iraq with the rest of his church when IS took over their homes. At the time, he had just begun training as a minister through an online pastoral course supported by Open Doors; but even though there is little likelihood that they will return home soon, Martin has decided to carry on with his training.

"This continuing situation has just solidified my calling," he explains to an Open Doors partner. "I am needed here at this moment to feed my people with charity and with hope."

As part of the course, Martin has been learning how to support people of all ages going through difficult times. "The displacement causes a type of stress that we haven't experienced before," he adds, thinking especially about the youth he works with. "You have to realise that IS didn't only take their house, the place they felt most comfortable. IS also seized their university and their future... Many of these people feel miserable and depressed."

### LAUGHTER ON THE LAKE

Every month, Martin takes the young people out on a trip so that they can laugh together and grow as a team. The sounds of joy are palpable as the youngsters steer swan-shaped boats on a lake, splashing each other playfully. "It makes them happy, but it also helps them get to know one another better," explains Martin.

At the heart of his teachings, Martin is keen that the young people connect with God: "The most important thing I want to teach the youngsters is that Jesus trusted His Father completely, even in the most miserable situation of being on the cross." And the youth are hearing the message. "Martin is helping us," the girl says. "He is a good teacher."

Martin himself has become a shining beacon of hope. His belief that he will return to Karamles is so strong that he's decided to wait to be ordained so that the service can take place in his childhood church. And he's enabling the

**"Everything that I've learned... I can now use to serve these people."**

young people to look forward: "Many of the youth feel the power to go back to our village and rebuild it again," Martin says. "Now we are just praying it will be liberated soon."

Thanks to the prayerful generosity of our supporters, Open Doors partners have been able to provide a lifeline for the displaced people of Karamles. Families have been sustained with regular food aid, nursery teachers have been trained, tents replaced with portacabins – including a centre for church and school activities – and church leaders like Martin have been equipped with training; all of which is enabling this displaced parish to hold on to their faith in Jesus.

"Everything that I've learned at school and in Open Doors partners' pastoral course, I can now use to serve these people," says Martin. "It's because of persistence in prayer and encouragement that they are slowly picking up their lives. They have hope again."

**You can watch an interview with Martin at [www.opendoorsuk.org/martin](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/martin)**

### • PRAY

- Thank God for Martin's servant heart. Pray he will continue to be a blessing to those he serves
- For wisdom for Open Doors partners providing pastoral training and counselling to those serving traumatised Christians
- Ask God to make a way for Martin, his community and other displaced believers in Iraq to return to their homes.



# MUSKATHLON 2017

## RUNNING THE RACE FOR REFUGEES

*Take on the challenge of a lifetime and make a real difference by running, walking or cycling to raise money for persecuted Christians.*

**This summer a team of six Open Doors supporters from the UK along with 30 Dutch participants completed a Muskathlon in Egypt and Jordan. The challenge took them to meet persecuted Christians in Egypt and Iraqi refugees in Jordan. We asked Stephen from Northern Ireland how the experience changed his life.**

### **Why did you choose to do the Muskathlon?**

*I have always wanted to run a marathon for a charity. I wanted to run one for the Lord and I saw the Muskathlon advert in the Open Doors Magazine. At the time the refugee crisis was all over the news – and seeing the state people were in made me want to help. Hebrews 12:1-2 kept coming to mind: “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.”*

### **How did you find the fundraising?**

*At the start it was daunting but God helped me through it. I managed £7,000 before Christmas thanks to people who signed up as regular givers to Open Doors. Slowly more people heard about what I was doing and I gave a presentation in church. I was very clear that everything they donated would go to help refugees and that I was paying for the travel costs out of my own pocket – that’s really important. Looking back now God has done more than we could ever have hoped for. With the wonderful help from my church, family and friends we have raised over £17,000!*

### **What were the highlights of the Muskathlon?**

*The whole thing was fantastic. It was so great to meet our persecuted brothers and sisters and stand*

*with them. It was also incredibly humbling to hear their stories. We take so much for granted in our Western society that I sometimes feel guilty – God has blessed us with what we have and we are privileged to be able to share our good fortune. The Muskathlon has brought me closer to God and has allowed me to meet people I would not have been able to meet.*

### **How did you cope with running a Marathon in the heat?**

*Actually I didn’t worry about the heat – I was worried about just getting through the event. I’ve been running all my life, but three months into my Muskathlon preparation, after a chance conversation with the family GP, I had an x-ray and was referred to a consultant. He told me I needed a hip replacement. The pain got worse and I couldn’t run as often as it took days to recover each time. I was worried I might not be able to complete the marathon – even getting in and out of a car was painful. My wife urged me to run the half marathon option instead but I really wanted to do a marathon*



Stephen (RIGHT) running the Muskathlon marathon

*for my supporters who had been so amazing. Before the Muskathlon we had devotions on Mount Nebo – we were asked if we had any prayer requests and I asked for prayer about my hip. As I stood up after our prayers the pain left my hip. I was able to run my whole marathon – it was incredible! God made it possible, he healed me. I’ve had no pain since I came home.*

### **What would you say to people thinking of doing a Muskathlon?**

*Don’t think about it – just do it! God will help you.*



Tim crossing the finish line after cycling 70 miles

Tim, one of our directors here at Open Doors, chose to cycle 70 miles for his Muskathlon. He held a Middle Eastern evening in his village with an auction of promises that raised more than £10,000 – and also asked family and friends to sign up to regular giving to reach his total of over £18,000.

*Tim says: I had never done any sort of sport before – I planned and trained for a year. My local mountain biking club helped me enormously both with my fitness and my fundraising. I really didn’t believe we would reach the £10,000 target but my church and neighbours made it all possible. Overall the Muskathlon was the greatest adventure – not just the event itself, but meeting the refugees for whom we were doing all this craziness.*

## MUSKATHLON 2017

*Ordinary people –  
Extraordinary challenge*

**Run a half, full or ultra-marathon, walk 40 miles or cycle 70 miles and raise £10,000 to support Christians facing extreme persecution. You decide where to take your challenge.**

### **Lebanon: 15-20 May 2017**

Money raised can support Syrian and Iraqi refugees forced to flee their homes to escape extreme persecution. In Syria, Iraq and Lebanon Open Doors is providing vital relief aid to thousands of displaced families. You will meet pastors, persecuted Christians and other refugees from Syria and Iraq as well as having the chance to help in a Lebanese refugee camp.

### **Sri Lanka: 7-14 October 2017**

Money raised can provide Bibles, training, trauma counselling and emergency shelter for persecuted Christians in Sri Lanka and surrounding countries such as India. You will meet Christians who have been driven out of their homes because of their faith and visit Open Doors projects that will benefit from the money you raise.

We will support you with training tips and fundraising advice to help you achieve your £10,000 fundraising target. All Muskathletes pay the cost of their trip and travel themselves.

**To register for one of next year’s Muskathlons or to find out more, go to [www.opendoorsuk.org/muskathlon](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/muskathlon), email [inspire@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:inspire@opendoorsuk.org) or call 01993 460015.**





Image used for illustrative purposes only

## IRAN: FAITH BEHIND BARS

**Christianity in Iran is growing. But as the number of believers grows, so the pressure on Christians increases: more arrests; further church closures; continued discrimination; increased surveillance.**

### ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

Iran, a Shia Muslim-majority nation, became an Islamic Republic after the 1979 Islamic revolution, in which the ruling Shah was overthrown and authority was assumed by the religious clerics and new government. At Iran's head, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ensures that conservative Islam remains at the centre of the country's decision-making and law.

### CHRISTIANITY: A WESTERN ENEMY

Christianity is seen as a hated Western influence – a constant threat to the Islamic Republic's identity. Under Sharia (Islamic law), many believers face discrimination and are limited in how and where they can practise Christianity. For historical ethnic Christians, like the Assyrians and Armenians, practising Christianity in their own languages is allowed, but they're treated as second-class citizens under the law and are banned from ministering to people from Muslim backgrounds. If they do, they face imprisonment and abuse.

Believers from a Muslim background (BMBs), though they are the largest Christian group in Iran, are under even tighter restrictions. Church services, evangelism and Christian literature in Farsi are banned. And under Sharia, believers who convert from Islam are seen as apostates which can mean the death penalty for a man and life imprisonment for a woman.

But BMBs also face extreme pressure from their families and communities to return to Islam – meaning many Christians have to hide their faith. The disgrace and danger associated with becoming a Christian can lead to unemployment, beatings, rejection and singleness, isolation in society and imprisonment.

In order to stem the growth of Christianity, churches have been closed and church leaders arrested. But as the pressure mounts, believers have instead taken their churches underground – worshipping in secret. And despite increased government surveillance and arrests, the underground church is growing and imprisoned believers are holding onto their faith.

### BELIEF BEHIND BARS

"I knew the day would come...the day they would ring my doorbell and take me and my husband to prison. Although everyone around me thought I was a housewife, I was, in fact, involved in full-time ministry. The authorities were bound to find out." These were the words of a young mother who

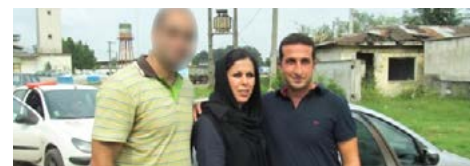
## WORLD WATCH LIST FACTS:

- At least 108 Christians were arrested or imprisoned for their faith in 2015
- Ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim – Christian literature, services and activities in the Persian language (Farsi) are banned
- Conversion from Islam carries the death penalty for men and life imprisonment for women
- Christian children from Muslim backgrounds are forced to take Islamic classes, as are all Christians in post-secondary education
- There appears to be a connection between the number of churches going underground and Christians arrested.

was recently arrested and imprisoned for her faith. During the freezing winter she was kept in a small cell where the guards put extreme pressure on her to give up the names of other Christian leaders. But prayers sustained her. "All of the sudden I felt a warm wind stroking my cheeks. 'Take it in,' I heard the Lord saying... With every breath of warm air I took, I felt my body being filled with joy."

Last year alone, at least 108 Christians were arrested because of their faith – police interrogation methods can be harsh and sexually abusive, and even freed Christians face continued police surveillance and interrogations.

Just recently, on 24 July, Iranian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani was charged with 'acting against national security', requiring him to raise 100 million Toman (£25,000) by 31 July or face arrest, Middle East Concern (MEC) reported. In 2010 Mr Nadarkhani had been sentenced to death on charges of apostasy and evangelism, before international outrage sparked his retrial and acquittal in 2012. But in May this year he was arrested again, this time alongside his wife, Tina, and three others. All have since been released.



Nadarkhani (RIGHT) welcomed by his wife after his release. Photo: Nadarkhani family

And on 24 June, ten Christians were arrested at an engagement party. At the time of writing, seven have been released, but three are still being held in an unknown location without charges, in solitary confinement. (To speak out for their release see urgent action below.)



Pastor Behnam and his son

But despite these harsh pressures, imprisoned Christians are remaining strong.

"Many of my cellmates in prison ask me why I don't just deny my belief and go back to my wife and children," said Pastor Behnam Irani, who has been imprisoned since 2010 for evangelising. "I then ask myself: what cost did the Lord pay to save me? I have decided to keep my faith in our Lord and stay in prison."

Source: MEC

### PRAY

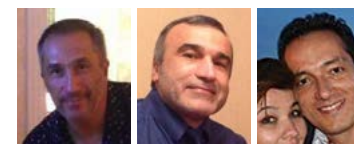
- For imprisoned believers like Pastor Yousef and Pastor Behnam, that they would receive God's sustenance, joy and freedom
- That underground churches would continue to grow
- That Iran's leaders and authorities would come to know the Lord.

## URGENT ACTION

Write to the Iranian authorities on behalf of the three imprisoned Christian men who were arrested on 24 June. Eldar Gurbanov, Yusif Farhadov and Bahram Nasibov, from Baku, Azerbaijan, were taken to an unknown destination for interrogation and have since been held in solitary confinement.

Their families are asking us to pray and write to the Iranian authorities to appeal for the men's safe return.

Take action today at: [www.opendoorsuk.org/iranprisoners](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/iranprisoners)





# SAVE ME

BRING HOPE TO THE MIDDLE EAST

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We cannot stand by while Islamic extremists attempt to destroy the church in the Middle East.

Despite the persecution they face, many Christians are choosing to stay in Syria and Iraq to provide essential support and care for those in great need. They believe they have a vital role to play in rebuilding these nations – but they need the church across the globe to stand with them.

## GIVE to send hope

Every £42 (€57) can provide an essential food pack to help a family of five survive for a month in Syria or Iraq.

## PRAY as never before

Hold a prayer event with your church this autumn – order our free *Pray for ME* pack to help you.

## SPEAK OUT for your church family

Join with Christians around the world by signing the One Million Voices petition, and show our church family in the Middle East that they aren't forgotten.

## PLEASE ACT TODAY

To give, pray and speak out, use the enclosed response form, visit [www.opendoorsuk.org](http://www.opendoorsuk.org) or call our Inspire team on 01993 460015.



Open Doors