

OpenDoors

magazine

60 years of serving persecuted Christians

September 2017

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HOPE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST
CAMPAIGN
SPECIAL



STANDING STRONG

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Saturday 21 October
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NEW!



Letter from Lisa: Constant

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 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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Cover image: Displaced Iraqi Christian Bassem and family appreciate the ongoing support from Open Doors partners.

With the future looking so uncertain in the current climate, and the pace of change so rapid in our culture, Heraclitus' words, uttered in the 6th century BC, wouldn't look out of place as a soundbite in 2017.

For Christian families in Iraq and Syria, fleeing violence and the threats of extremists, uncertainty is the only certain thing. My heart goes out to Madonna and her family (p10) who have moved house 16 times in the past few years. And there are thousands more like them. It reminds me of a family I met in Lebanon: in a dark room with concrete walls I was standing talking to them for about 20 minutes before my eyes acclimatised enough to see what looked like a pile of blankets on the floor. When it moved, the father of the house explained: "That is my 14-year-old son. He just can't face the day." After a pause, he added quietly, "I feel like I'm dying every day." Unemployed and unable to help his family, the father was as distraught as his son.

The good news is that, thanks to your support, these families are exactly the kind of people Open Doors' partners are serving today in Iraq and Syria, lifting their lives to a place of hope through employment and empowerment (read more on p10). The challenges presented by the conflict in the Middle East can leave me feeling overwhelmed as an individual – but praise God, as part of His family, I am not alone. And together as the family of God we can be a huge force for positive change.

We have some amazing relations in this family; the faith of so many of my persecuted

"The only thing that is constant is change"

Heraclitus, Greek philosopher

brothers and sisters continues to inspire me. The fact that 12-year-old displaced Noah feels the Holy Spirit reassuring him it will be good to go home (p8), tells me that God is at work. Noah's awareness of God's goodness has been nurtured by his immediate family and church community. But it's also thanks to his wider family – to all who have prayed for him and others like him – showing him that God has not forgotten him. That's what the *Hope for the Middle East* campaign is all about – thank you so much for being a part of it. Through people's prayers and gifts, Noah and his family, and numerous others, have fresh hope and courage for the days ahead.

So let's not give up now. Instead, let's be constant in our support and prayers. And by signing the global petition and sharing it with others, you can leave an indelible mark on thousands of lives. If you're in any doubt about that, join us at Standing Strong. When you hear the stories of how our amazing God is at work through our incredible brothers and sisters, I know your faith will grow. See you there!

Lisa

Lisa Pearce
CEO, Open Doors UK&I

WORLD WATCH NEWS

INDIA: Martyred Pastor's family refuse to give up their faith

"Our family will continue to serve God." That's the defiant message from the family of Pastor Sultan Masih (47), who was recently killed in Ludhiana, northwest India.

Pastor Sultan was shot outside the church he had led for 20 years. He leaves a wife and four children.

Open Doors volunteers visited the grieving family to offer prayer and support. His son, Alisha, who is also training to be a pastor, said his father had received messages saying that if he continued to preach, he would be killed.

"Our father was a courageous man and he was never afraid to die for Jesus," Alisha said. "He has put the same zeal in us."

Pastor Sultan's death comes as new figures show that anti-Christian violence in India is showing no signs of slowing down. According to figures collected by Open Doors partners, there have been 410 persecution incidents in the first half of 2017, including 84 cases of violent assault and many incidents where Christians were expelled from their villages.

In one horrifying case, 15 Christians were driven from their village by a mob of 2,000 people. The group had been warned that if they did not give up their faith they would suffer the consequences. All of them were beaten; one 22-year-old girl was beaten until she was unconscious. The mob taunted the Christians saying, "If your Jesus is alive ask him to heal her right now." The girl eventually regained consciousness and all of them fled from the village. They are now staying in a church in another village.



Pastor Sultan Masih with his wife. Pastor Sultan was killed by unknown assailants



These Christians were driven from their village by a mob of 2,000 people

"If the forced Hinduisation of India continues, violence in India against Christians and other minorities will increase too," said an Open Doors spokesman. "We call upon India and the international community to do everything in their power to protect the millions of people who are persecuted because of their faith."

• PRAY

- For comfort for the family of Sultan Masih, and all those exiled from their communities
- For courage for Christians who are fearful for the future
- For Open Doors partners supporting Christians in India with emergency relief and longterm support.



"Our father was a courageous man and he was never afraid to die for Jesus"

Alisha, Pastor Sultan Masih's son, India

SUDAN: Another church demolished

Another church has been destroyed in Sudan. According to information given to Open Doors, a Baptist church in Omdurman, across the Nile from the capital Khartoum, was demolished on 2 August. The church is the third of some 27 churches designated for destruction last year by the Sudanese government. The authorities claim that these buildings are in violation of the designated purposes of the land on which they were built.

The issue of church demolitions was raised by Ján Figel, the EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, during a recent visit to the country. He was assured that demolitions had been temporarily halted, but since then at least two more churches have been destroyed and a church worker lost his life when he tried to intervene.

Christians face ever-increasing

pressure in Sudan. There have been calls for all Christian-run schools in Khartoum to treat Sundays as a work day. Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, also spent three days in Sudan, where he raised the issue of religious freedom with the Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir.

"My prayer for Sudan is that there will be freedom continually so that Christians may live confidently, blessing their country. The more they are free, the more they will be a blessing to Sudan," the Archbishop said.



Archbishop of Canterbury in Sudan, 29 July 2017
(Credit: Archbishop of Canterbury)

• PRAY

- That the church demolitions will stop
- For wisdom and protection for Christians as they engage with the government.

Source: World Watch Monitor

ETHIOPIA: Christian worker attacked by machetes

An Ethiopian Christian has been attacked with machetes on account of his evangelistic work. Mustafa Ahmed* (27) was attacked by a mob on 16 July in the rural Ethiopian town of Hirna, about 400 km east of Addis Ababa.



Open Doors' local partners are providing him with emotional and financial support as he recovers from life-threatening wounds.

The attack took place because local Muslims were angry over his evangelism efforts. Local Christians report that an unknown number of assailants first went to the local Full Gospel Church and damaged its roof and walls. They then went to Mustafa's house where they attacked him with machetes. He sustained two deep wounds to the back of his head and was rushed to a local clinic in Hirna. From there he was sent on to a series of hospitals. In the end a Christian doctor was forced to risk an operation, believing that Mustafa would

otherwise die on route to a bigger hospital. The surgery has stabilised him enough to be taken for more specialised treatment elsewhere. But he is not out of the woods yet, and local Christians ask for prayer.

Ethiopia is number 22 in the World Watch List of countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian. Despite this, the evangelical church is growing.

• PRAY

- For Mustafa's complete recovery from his wounds
- That the Lord will open the eyes of government officials to protect their citizens, irrespective of religious affiliation.

*Name changed for security reasons

CENTRAL ASIA: Christians face abuse, injustice, violence

Every week, Open Doors receives news from Christians in Central Asia, who face daily discrimination, suspicion and injustice.

In Kyrgyzstan local Muslim radicals broke into a church, stole items, destroyed furniture and left graffiti on the walls and windows saying 'We will kill you', and 'Don't teach our children'. The pastor reported the incident to the police, but received little support. "They don't want to help Christians," reports an Open Doors expert. Despite this, the church has decided to continue with their normal services and outreach activity.

FALSE ACCUSATIONS

Pastor Miran* from Kyrgyzstan was falsely accused of sexually harassing a schoolgirl. After spending months in prison and under house arrest, charges were dropped at his trial, when compelling evidence of his innocence was presented. But his

church lost its official registration after his arrest, so Miran's ministry is technically illegal. Local people view him with suspicion and nobody will give him a job. What has helped is knowing that people around the world are praying for him.

"So many people all over the world keep praying for me and my family," he said. "It gives me strength and power to move ahead, to keep fighting. Now I see that I have a great family all over the world – I am so grateful for this! God bless all of you, my precious brothers and sisters!"

SECRET MEETING

In another Central Asian country a group of Christian women – all Muslim-background believers – were arrested during a secret meeting. Police beat them and threatened to imprison them. Four of the group recanted under the pressure, but two of the women – Guliyar* and Asel* – remained resolute. Guliyar – who has cerebral palsy – had already

been thrown out of her family home for becoming a Christian. She was fined \$1000 for 'illegal religious meetings' and 'proselytism'. Both women are under strict police control, so communicating with them is difficult. "It is not safe enough, so we still don't have information about the court judgement on Asel," reports an Open Doors source. "Please, pray for these strong women, for their faith in this stressful situation."

**Names changed for security reasons*

• PRAY

- For Christians facing false accusations and unjust treatment
- For healing for Christians who have undergone traumatic experiences
- For safety and security for churches.

IRAQ: Fear of 'Kurdish conspiracy' as Christian mayor dismissed

Iraqi Christians fear that the recent ousting of a Christian mayor by a pro-Kurdish council is part of a Kurdish agenda to take control of northern Christian-majority towns.

Fayez Abed Jawahreh was the mayor of Alqosh, a Christian-majority town in the Nineveh Plain. He was dismissed from office on 16 July by Bashar Al Kekee, the head of the Nineveh Provincial Council and a member of the ruling Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). The district of Alqosh borders the Kurdish region but is under the jurisdiction of the central government of Iraq.

Alqosh was attacked by so-called Islamic State (IS) in 2014. Although IS never actually occupied the town, it was largely abandoned. Now, as IS have been driven back, some residents have begun to return. But having survived IS, Iraqi Christians fear that the Kurdish authorities are trying to gain permanent control of

Iraqi towns they liberated.

Another Christian mayor in the region, Basim Ballo of the town of Telkaif, said he feared he could be similarly ousted and claimed that Mr Jawahreh's removal was part of a Kurdish conspiracy to get rid of any Christian in high office in the Nineveh Plain.

The Kurdish leader, President Barzani, has also scheduled a referendum on independence for 25 September – a referendum which the Iraqi government has rejected as 'unconstitutional'. Many Christians believe a strong central government in Baghdad to be preferable to Kurdish rule.

• PRAY

- That Christians ousted from this region would be able to return
- That the referendum will not lead to further unrest in the region
- For Open Doors partners supporting Christians from Alqosh with livelihood training and trauma support.



CAMPAIGN UPDATE

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

Broken glass, rubble, ash. This is all that's left of the homes of too many of our brothers and sisters in Iraq and Syria, as Islamic extremists attempt to wipe out the church. While the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) have largely been driven out of Mosul and the Nineveh Plain in Iraq, they have left terrible devastation behind them. In Syria, the war rages on, and Christians continue to be a target for Islamic extremists.

Incredibly, there are Christians who are choosing to stay in the Middle East, the birth place of Christianity, because they believe that God has called them to shine as lights in the darkest of days. They have a vision to rebuild their homes and communities.

But this won't happen overnight. This is why the global *Hope for the Middle East* campaign is a seven-year campaign. Your support is keeping hope alive for thousands of families in Iraq and Syria, and we must continue to walk with them for as long as they need us, giving what we can, calling on world leaders to intervene, and crying out to the God who is able to give 'a crown of beauty instead of ashes' (Isaiah 61:3).

Determined to return

"After the liberation in October we found out that Islamic State had burned our house. I was very sad when I saw it for the first time," says Noeh.

Noeh is 12 years old – his family fled their home in Karamles, Iraq,

LEFT Noeh has been able to visit his home for the first time in three years. On the back page you can see his bedroom as IS left it.

when he was just nine, to escape IS. "My Mum and Dad, my brothers and sisters were always around me, and they helped me to overcome the difficulties."

For the last three years they have lived in Erbil with others from their town – they have called the part of Erbil where they have been staying 'Little Karamles'. Thanks to your prayers and support, Open Doors has been working through local partners to support this community with food aid, trauma training, and income generating projects – some of the people from Karamles have been able to start a small food factory, a bakery, and a restaurant in Erbil.

But Noah and his family are determined to go back to Karamles to rebuild. Noah says, "We want to return home. We thank everyone who is helping us. I know there are others from our village who don't want to return, but I do want to return. This is our land."

**"We want to return home.
We thank everyone who is
helping us."**

Such a dream might seem impossible as you look at Noah's home in Karamles – it has been completely burned out by the militants. Showing what's left of his room, Noah says, "These were my toys, all of them are now burned. Now I have nothing."

But as he looks at the remnants of his room, he suddenly says, "My marbles!" Picking through the ashes, he finds enough marbles to play with. They're a symbol of the sparks of hope that many of our Iraqi brothers and sisters are finding, even in the most challenging situations.

Noah says that it is God who gives him the hope that he will be able to return to Karamles. "I feel the Holy Spirit inside me... He tells me it is good to live in Karamles again."

And he already knows what he wants his new room to look like. "I want my bedroom to be colourful – red, blue and green with pictures of FC Barcelona and Jesus on the wall!"

Of the 797 houses in Karamles, 97 are now piles of rubble, 446 were completely burnt out, like Noah's, and the others are damaged. Your prayers and support have enabled our local partners to repair 30 homes in Karamles so far, with 20 more on the list. Father Thabet, a church leader in Karamles, says, "We start with the houses with the



Noah and his family are determined to return to their home in Karamles, Iraq



Noah, searching through the ashes in his room at his destroyed home in Karamles



Father Thabet with kids at 'Little Karamles' camp in Erbil



Najib returned to his home in Qaraqosh to find that IS had left his house with a hole big enough to stand in

least amount of damage. Our budget is limited and the government is not helping us."

While 50 houses are a good start, 250 families have signed up to return to Karamles – there's still a lot more to do.

Father Thabet says, "It is our mission to live here in this place as Christians, the place of the root of Christianity. Without faith I do not have a reason to stay here. But I have faith, so I am here."

Thabet has signed the One Million Voices of Hope petition, calling for equality, dignity and responsibility for Christians and other minorities in the Middle East, which is being presented to the UN on 11 December this year. He says, "We need international support and protection. That is the only way our future as Christians in this country can be guaranteed."

▶ See for yourself

Visit the Open Doors website to see a short film of Noah in his house: www.opendoorsuk.org

Piece by piece

Not far away from Karamles, in Qaraqosh, Najib returned to his home to find that IS had left one of the bedrooms with a hole big enough for him to stand in. Every wall of the house was covered in writing: in one place was the signature of 'Abu Asman', one of the militants, and in another place it said 'He who refuses Islamic State will surely be killed.'

Najib's house is one of 124 houses in Qaraqosh that have been repaired, with the help of brothers and sisters like you. Before the invasion of IS, the city was home to 50,000 Christians. Some of the houses have been burned from the inside or ransacked and vandalised by the militants, like Najib's house; other parts of the town were completely destroyed by bombs or rockets.

When asked how they decided where to begin their repairs, George, a church leader from Qaraqosh, explains, "We decided to restore the city piece by piece so that we wouldn't get isolated houses where a family would live between empty houses. The main thought is that we need to



Father George is involved in the rebuilding and restoration of Qaraqosh, Iraq

recreate the sense of community.”

The first houses to be repaired are close to the centre of the town, where there are a few shops. Over 20 small shops have opened in Qaraqosh, a sign that the town is coming back to life. Most of these small businesses sell construction materials and paint, but a small cafeteria has also opened its doors, as well as a shop where water and other drinks can be bought.

One of the shopkeepers told an Open Doors local partner, “I know the security is not okay yet, but I wanted to start my life here again. A lot of families want to go back, but they don’t have the resources to do so.”

George says, “Your organisation has committed to help restoring parts of our town. By doing that, you gave hope to many families, but much more is needed.”

“A lot of families want to go back, but they don’t have the resources to do so.”

He continues, “I think we need at least an international commitment to survey our situation, to push the government to protect the vulnerable minorities like the Christians and the Yazidis.” This is why we are taking the One Million Voices of Hope petition to the UN and UK government in December.

► See for yourself

Visit the Iraq country profile on the Open Doors website to see a short film of George in Qaraqosh: www.opendoorsuk.org/iraq



Your support has provided Madonna with training

‘Jesus teaches us how to be patient’

Until more homes and communities have been restored, thousands of families will continue to live in displacement in Iraq. But your support is enabling our local partners to invest in income generating projects, so that displaced people can have the dignity of working and supporting their families.

Madonna and her family have had to relocate 16 times since they fled their home. She says, “I was four months pregnant when the trouble with Islamic State started in our area. When we were in the hospital, we saw the victims of one of the bombings, but there were hardly any doctors left to help them. That convinced us – we had to go.”

The family are now renting a house in a safer part of Iraq. Her husband ran a building business in their home town, but has had to start again from scratch. Your prayers and gifts have enabled us to provide Madonna with training in tailoring, and now she runs a small business from her home, so she can also help to support their family. She says, “I am happy that we aren’t alone in this.”

Ghazan, a father of three, says, “Back in my own town on the Nineveh plain I used to have a successful transportation company. We had a good life until IS came and forced us out. I heard that IS stole all the cars of my company.”

He arrived in Erbil empty handed. “The first 15 days in Erbil were really hard,” Ghazan says. “I couldn’t find a job, I had no income, and the rent for our apartment was high.”

When the church offered him a managerial position at a bakery that had been established by partners of Open Doors, he took the job immediately. “Although I don’t earn much here and I have to work much longer hours than what I was used to back home, at least I can pay my rent so my



Ghazan now runs a bakery, thanks to Open Doors partners

Meeting our brothers and sisters

Zoe Smith, Head of Advocacy for Open Doors UK and Ireland, was able to visit Iraq and meet some of the people whom our local partners are supporting. Here she reflects on her time there.



One memory of Iraq that I will never forget is of visiting a church in Erbil, and just seeing rows of old ladies, sitting at the front, praying. There was no service on, but more arrived in the few minutes we were there. “They come every day to pray,” the church leader told us. “Thank God for the faithful Grandmas,” a member of our group commented, with absolute sincerity. It was just one of the times when I was struck by the incredible faith of the people we are working to support in Iraq.

I was also repeatedly reminded of how important the calls of the One Million Voices of Hope petition are – calls for equality, dignity, and a role to play in bringing reconciliation for Christians and other minorities in Iraq and Syria.

I met Christians who have been threatened with death and driven from their homes for refusing to give up their faith in Jesus. Even when they aren’t being threatened by Islamic extremists, Christians are often made to feel like second class citizens; I heard about one man who struggled just to buy a wood-burning stove to keep his family warm when they were first displaced, simply because he was a Christian. Equality, both under law and in day-to-day life, is vital.

I was also able to visit projects that reminded me how important dignity is. We went to a food factory that is providing work for displaced believers, and that was the word they used to describe what the work meant to them – ‘dignity’. It was so much more than just putting food on the table.

And as I watched church leaders counselling members of their congregations, it became clear that they need to be able to play a role in bringing reconciliation to their communities. In this culture, men may not feel able to go to a doctor or a counsellor with their problems, but would feel no shame in going to their church leader. These leaders see their communities as they really are and understand the trauma and hardships of their people better than most.

But our church family in Iraq need us to speak out for them. There simply isn’t a platform within Iraq itself where these displaced Christians can speak up for themselves. If we, their brothers and sisters in Christ, don’t raise our voices on their behalf, who will?

If you haven’t already, please sign the One Million Voices of Hope petition enclosed with this magazine and ask others to sign it too.

family doesn’t have to live in a camp.

“I am a Christian and Jesus teaches us how to be patient. In this situation there is no other road than to be patient; this situation forced us to practise that. I have lost everything, but I thank God that my family is still with me.”

‘God has sent you from heaven’

In Syria, while some have been able to repair their homes and start small business in areas that have become more stable, thousands remain in great need as the war continues. Your prayers and support are enabling Open Doors’ partners to provide 15,500 Syrian families with food packs and hygiene kits.

Samer’s family is one of those receiving food through a local church that Open Doors partners with in Aleppo. He has a job, but still struggles to support

his family. “My salary is too low,” Samer explains. “I have a salary of about 60 US dollars a month. Half of it goes to the home rent. My family needs between 200 and 300 dollars per month. If one of us gets sick, we can’t afford to go to a doctor or buy medicine. We cannot pay for school materials.”

The food aid provided thanks to your prayers and support makes a real difference. “I can tell you that not a single family in Aleppo can live and continue to raise their children without receiving help. This aid helps us to get through this difficult period. Thank you. The continued assistance you provide gives us hope to continue our life with our families staying in our dear country.”

Another family receiving support through Open Doors local partners is Nazle’s family. She is a single mother; her husband was sent to prison, and

Many Christians visited their village, Qaraqosh, for the first time since it was liberated from so-called Islamic State to celebrate Palm Sunday, April 2017



although he has been released, he no longer wishes to see Nazle or his children, Mary (7) and Antoine (8).

Nazle works as a waitress in Aleppo to try to support her children. When our local partners visited her, they were shocked to find that Mary and Antoine could not read or write. Nazle said, "I am sad that I could not send my children to school, knowing they need education. But I just couldn't afford it."

With your help, Mary and Antoine are now going to school. Nazle says, "God has sent you from heaven. Without your help in paying for the rent, I do not know what would have happened to me. I thank you for your help to me. My life has changed now I am

receiving the food packages and the help.

"For the first time in years I feel that there is some hope."

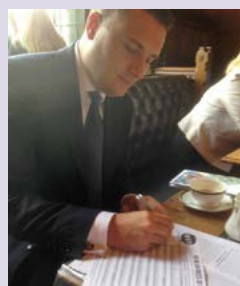
"My kids started to attend Sunday school at the church, and for the first time in years I feel that there is some hope. I can see hope through the smiles on the faces of my kids. Through them I recognise Jesus Christ, the giver of hope and life."

Thank you for speaking out

With the liberation of Mosul and most of the Nineveh Plain in Iraq, many are now hoping to return to their homes. But it's not simple. Many are afraid that, despite IS being driven out, their ideology will remain. Extremist views have flourished for many years in the Middle East; Christians were being persecuted there long before the arrival of IS.

It is clear from the scale of the devastation in Iraq and Syria and the complexity of the challenges facing our brothers and sisters that an international response is vital if the church in the Middle East is going to survive. Our brothers and sisters simply can't rebuild their homes, communities and nations on their own.

That's why we're so thankful to everyone who has signed the One Million Voices of Hope petition and asked others to sign it too – every voice raised makes the calls of the petition louder, and makes it harder for our leaders to ignore. At the time of writing 338,000 people from 125 countries had signed the petition. This includes over 78,000 people from the Middle East – we're not just speaking out for our brothers and sisters, we're speaking out with them.



supporter persuaded Wes Streeting MP (pictured) to sign the petition, and other MPs also signed the

Dozens of supporters came to London to speak to their MP in person on behalf of their church family in the Middle East on 12 July – 30 MPs had meetings with supporters from Open Doors. One amazing

petition or committed to speak to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development about the *Hope for the Middle East* campaign.

The week before, on 5 July, Open Doors also brought the *Hope for the Middle East* campaign to the National Assembly for Wales, with the Evangelical Alliance Wales. The event was hosted by Assembly Member Darren Millar (pictured with Eddie Lyle, President of Open Doors UK & Ireland).



Darren Millar then raised a 'statement of opinion', which 14 Assembly Members subscribed to, calling on the Welsh and UK Government to work with the international community to achieve the aims of the One Million Voices of Hope petition – equality, dignity and responsibility for Christians and other minorities in Syria and Iraq.

The campaign has also been taken to politicians around the world. In April, Swedish MPs heard directly from Open Doors' field worker, 'Rami', about the challenges facing Christians in Syria and Iraq and the difference they are making to their countries. European Union staff and politicians heard the same at a packed meeting in early June, as well as at follow-up meetings since. Further, the Open Doors team held key meetings at the UN at the end of June. All this is helping to bring the voice of the church to those who can make a real difference.



Don't believe the lie that there's nothing you can do to help your church family in the Middle East – you have far more power than you realise. Here are four things you can do today that will help to bring hope to our brothers and sisters in Iraq and Syria.

Give to rebuild hope

The generous gifts of Open Doors supporters are making an incredible difference to our brothers and sisters in Iraq and Syria – they have helped Najib repair the hole in the floor of his home, ensured that Madonna and Ghazan have work, enabled Mary and Antoine to go to school. None of this would be possible without your gifts and prayers.

Every £25 could go towards rebuilding a home or setting up a family in employment in Iraq.

Every £42 could provide a month's emergency food supplies for a displaced family in Syria.

It costs between £600 and £4,000 to set up a family in sustainable employment or to repair their home. For example, **£60** could replace a water tank on a bomb-damaged roof.

But any amount that you are able to give will make a difference – every brick and every nail shows our church family in Iraq and Syria that we aren't giving up on them.

Sign and share the petition

Thank you to everyone who has already signed the One Million Voices of Hope petition and shared it with others. If you haven't already done so, please sign the petition enclosed with this magazine, and ask others to sign it too. The petition will be presented to the



UN on 11 December, and the UK government on 13 December – so we need your signatures by 4 December! It might sound like we still have plenty of time, but December is going to come around fast! The more voices we can add to the calls of petition, the more our leaders will be compelled to act.

Pray as never before

In his book *Prayer: The Real Battle*, Brother Andrew, the founder of Open Doors, says, "If we want to leave an indelible mark on the world, there is no more powerful way to do it than by joining in God's purposes through prayer." We can 'leave a mark' in the Middle East by crying out to God for our church family in Syria and Iraq.

- Pray for the people you've read about in this article – Noah, Thabet, Najib, George, Madonna, Ghazan, Samer, Nazle. Ask God to protect them, give them strength, and provide for all their needs.
- Pray for energy and wisdom for Open Doors partners working to support believers in Iraq and Syria.
- Pray for the church in Iraq and Syria. Ask God to continue to use His church as a light in the darkness.
- Pray for the future of Iraq and Syria. Ask God to use the international community to bring peace and stability to the region.

Tell your church

We've made it easy for you to tell your whole church about the *Hope for the Middle East* campaign. The *Rebuild Hope* pack provides everything you need to hold an all-age service, telling the story of Noah and helping anyone – of any age – to understand the situation for families like his. It includes:

- an inspiring, adaptable and fun all-age service outline
- stimulating resources for prayer
- the global petition form
- stickers
- 'Speak up for Noah' poster

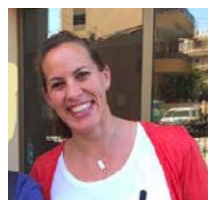
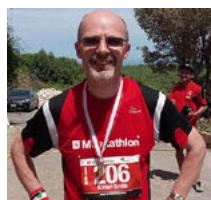


A DVD and other resources are also available to order or download, including child-friendly film, *Noah's story*

To order your free pack, use the enclosed response form, visit www.opendoorsuk.org or call our Inspire team on **01993 460015**.

LEBANON MUSKATHLON

- ORDINARY PEOPLE DOING AN EXTRAORDINARY CHALLENGE -



(from left: Katie, Adrian, Vaughan, Victoria)

How far would you go to support your persecuted family? Four Open Doors supporters took a leap of faith and pushed themselves to their limits when they took part in this year's Muskathlon event. Katie, Adrian, Vaughan and Victoria ran, trekked or cycled across rugged Lebanese terrain, with the aim of raising £10,000 to support their persecuted brothers and sisters, whom they met during the week. We asked them to share some of their experiences.

Why did you choose to take part in the Muskathlon?

Katie: God gave me a picture about needing to submit and make myself available to Him. Twice, as I was praying and waiting on Him, the Muskathlon ad appeared on Facebook. I dismissed it, thinking, "The only running event I've ever taken part in is Couch to 5k – I can't possibly do a Muskathlon!" When I finally submitted my application a year later, it felt like one of the hardest things I've ever done because I would have to leave my family behind. But I knew I was being obedient to God.

Victoria and Vaughan: We follow the stories about what different organisations are doing in the Middle East but it's still hard to understand what's really going on. It's only really by visiting and seeing first hand that you get a feel for what's happening on the ground.

What were the highlights of the trip?

Victoria and Vaughan: It was wonderfully encouraging to hear how the community had grown from a small group of people with a heart for Syrian refugees, into a remarkable church with a school for 200 refugee children as well as a clinic providing medical and dental care. The Syrian pastors described such difficult challenges they had faced and yet they were full of joy.

Adrian: There is a large rock off the coast of Byblos which we were able to reach by boat. We swam in the sea and enjoyed a time of teaching and worship there. One song in particular was about stepping out on the water and putting our trust in Jesus which felt very relevant for the Muskathlon. It was really special.

What were the greatest challenges?

Katie: I had a hip injury shortly before I was due to travel and was advised by two different health professionals that I should cancel my plans and rest for six weeks. I decided to rest for two weeks but still carry on. Even after the event was finished I didn't experience any pain – a complete miracle!

Adrian: The run required a lot of perseverance but there were some times of real encouragement. At one stage I saw some yellow butterflies that I had never seen before. They were like little angels, a reminder that God was there. Another time I heard two other team members singing a worship song with the lyrics, 'Saviour, he can move the mountains, my God is mighty to save'. Whilst God didn't move the mountain, it did give me momentum for the next few miles!

Victoria and Vaughan: Fifteen hours on the road was definitely more tiring than we had expected. When we were struggling it was helpful to think about the families we had met during the week and remember

that entire families have walked similar distances to flee war and bombings. We were doing this as an event, but many people are undergoing similar exertion out of necessity.

How has the trip changed you?

Katie: Because life is easy here we often become complacent. One of the Syrian pastors we met recounted that six members of his congregation were shot on their way to church one morning. When I came back home I had such a sense of gratitude that I could go to church without fearing hardship or persecution.

What is your advice to anyone considering a Muskathlon?

Katie: If God is calling you to do it then He will give you the strength and ability to do it. With God you can do anything!

Victoria and Vaughan: Don't be put off by the fundraising challenge. That's one of the steps of faith. We're called to look after the widows and orphans and this trip is doing exactly that. Christ isn't a sermon – he's action on the ground.

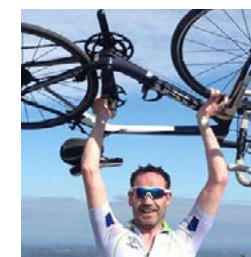
FUNDRAISING OPPORTUNITIES IN 2018

If you are feeling inspired by what you have read and would like to go the extra mile to serve your persecuted family, join us for a 2018 Muskathlon!

Sri Lanka: 24th May – 2nd June
Jordan: 6th – 13th October

Alternatively how about the Great South Run or 5k? Or a Pilgrimage Walk from Winchester to Canterbury?

To register or find out more, visit www.opendoorsuk.org/fundraise, email inspire@opendoorsuk.org or call 01993 460015.



Massive congratulations to Stephen Kyle who has raised over £12,000 cycling over 4,800 miles from Bangor, Northern Ireland, to... Turkey!



A huge well done to Jonathan Bryson who has completed the Marathon des Sables – an incredible six marathons over six days in the Sahara desert – raising over £9,700.

YOUR SUPPORT SAVES LIVES IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

"WE WILL NEVER FORGET WHAT YOU HAVE DONE FOR US"

Thanks to the remarkable response of supporters to the recent emergency appeal for believers facing famine in northern Nigeria, Open Doors was able to scale up relief work immediately.

Over 15,000 families – 75,000 individuals – have received lifesaving aid. And they want to tell you, thank you!

"We have been dancing and clapping. We are going to cook this maize and beans and praise the Lord and appreciate what God has done for us. We are grateful," says Alisa Bature from northern Nigeria. "Extend our regards to whosoever contributed to this food."

"You people have spoken sense into our lives," says Mary Gambo Wawsa. "We have been hungry. Life is not easy. These things are going to help me a lot... Is it not okay for me to tell God, thank you? I am grateful."

In June, the UN World Food Programme warned that hundreds of thousands of Nigerians could starve to death in the famine-threatened north east due to lack of aid funds to feed them. But thanks to your support, through the local church Open Doors has been able to provide three months' worth of food to 15,000 families, each receiving 50kg beans, 100kg maize and financial support to help them to survive.

Rhoda, who has seven mouths to feed and struggles to make ends meet, was another beneficiary. "One fateful day we went to school and when we came back we found our house burned with our father inside.

"Life has not been easy for us. But thank God for Open Doors who gave us these gifts. It has not

been easy for people because food items are very, very expensive. So we want to say, 'Thank you!'"

"You have demonstrated the love of God"

"We are so grateful for this food aid," shares Pastor Bulus* from Yobe State. He cries as he says, "Please tell the people who gave towards this aid that we will never forget what they have done for us. We have never experienced such help. You have demonstrated the love of God. On Sunday, people came to church en masse to praise God. And they thank the people who provided this aid."

"Supporters won't believe what this help means to us all," says an Open Doors partner in Nigeria.

"We know that people make sacrifices so we can be



Rhoda is one of 75,000 people who received aid through Open Doors partners



Christians collecting emergency food aid in north east Nigeria

helped, and this makes us so emotional. We will not forget your labour of love. We are praying for all of you and the beneficiaries are praying for you all.

"We know that people make sacrifices so we can be helped, and this makes us so emotional"

"We give thanks to God for you. Know that this is making a big difference. These (actions) keep the light of God shining in the north. We are the messengers to them of the love of all of you praying for us and supporting us in this relief effort."

▶ See for yourself

You can watch Rhoda's story and see the impact of your support at www.opendoorsuk.org/nigeria

• PRAY

- Praise God for protecting those distributing food, and that so many people have been helped thanks to the generosity of Open Doors supporters
- For wisdom for the local church as they work with Open Doors and other local aid agencies to provide for the most vulnerable in Nigeria
- For peace in the region and that the love of God will spread throughout north east Nigeria.

Thank you for all of your support. Please continue to pray and give towards the work in Nigeria – there's more to be done and the relief programme is not yet fully funded.

Visit www.opendoorsuk.org/nigeria

FAMINE – THE UNFORESEEN IMPACT OF BOKO HARAM

Since 2009, the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency has resulted in over 20,000 deaths and the displacement of over 2 million people. But the agricultural impact of the insurgency is only just being realised.

- Many internally displaced people (IDPs) are from Borno State – a vast region of farmland which has seen the highest concentration of attacks. For the fourth year in a row, Borno is going without a harvest
- Supplying food is dangerous: marketplaces, aid distribution points and roads are targeted in militant attacks
- Population movements put pressure on host communities to provide food, and worsen food security
- The Nigerian government is closing IDP camps, forcing many to return to insecure regions where food is scarce.

Christians face extra challenges as the little aid that reaches needy people in the north east is primarily distributed to Muslims over Christians. "The discrimination Christians face in relief aid is a politically incorrect message, hardly anyone reported on it," says an aid distribution team leader for Open Doors. "We witnessed the hunger increase in informal camps, and in host communities, as food became scarcer and scarcer and people remained unable to farm."

Thanks to your support, over £80,000 has so far been raised in the UK and Ireland since March to support vulnerable Christians with aid in north east Nigeria.

*Name changed for security reasons

MEET YOUR FAMILY AT
STANDING STRONG
 OPEN DOORS CELEBRATION 2017
 BIRMINGHAM : 14 OCTOBER | BELFAST : 21 OCTOBER

Until five years ago, Pastor Jamal*, a guest speaker at *Standing Strong*, was just the leader of a small congregation in a Lebanese border town. But since then, the church has grown rapidly and is now reaching thousands of Syrian refugees. Through a local partner, Open Doors is supporting their work and we're really excited that Pastor Jamal is coming to *Standing Strong* to share more. Here's a little taster to whet your appetite!

Pastor Jamal says: "We have more than 1.5 million refugees coming into our country. Everyone sees in that a very big problem, but we see in that a very big opportunity."

When the crisis started in Syria, refugees started flooding into the Beqaa Valley. The church, newly planted in 2003, started giving them food parcels. Suddenly, the street was full of people wanting food!

"These people, they just need to see the love of Christ," continues Pastor Jamal. "They never had the chance to hear the gospel before. So now our role is to step in and share with them the message of hope and love. We are trying to help these people with both hands, physically and spiritually. Many of them are telling us, 'We had the wrong idea about Christianity'."

'We are witnessing miracles every week'

"We are the ambassadors of Christ. As believers, our message is to reconcile people to God. And we see in this open door, a very good chance to show these refugees that God is good and turns everything into good after all the evil that they have seen."

"We believe that the smallest light can penetrate the greatest darkness. We believe we are in the right place, at the right time. With time, many of the refugees have come to Christ. So now they are doing the work – more than 70 per cent of our team are refugees themselves. It is not a small team – or church – anymore."

"I believe it is their day of salvation. God is doing something special with these people. And we are witnessing miracles every week."

*Name changed for security reasons

Open Doors recently took a group of church leaders to Pastor Jamal's church, including Rev. Jo McKee of Partner Church, St Andrew's, Radcliffe. Here she talks about what she saw and why she's looking forward to hearing Pastor Jamal at *Standing Strong*.

How did you feel when you saw what Pastor Jamal and his church are doing?

It was amazing! Although the church is only 14 years old, it's grown phenomenally in that time. The building had just been completed when the Syrian conflict began - and was needing to find its use. After that it became clear! Now, it's not just a church: it's a school, a clinic, and a centre of hope for thousands of people. Refugees in local camps are provided with food and clean water, as well as fuel and blankets in winter. The church also offers medical aid, job training, activities for children and, on top of that, an excellent discipleship programme for new believers. The whole thing is empowering local people to empower others. I looked at it and thought: Wow! My church should be doing this!

What does 'standing strong' mean for persecuted Christians fleeing Syria?

They know the cost of taking up your cross. In most cases, their burdens are so much heavier than ours, but they have a deeper and stronger joy, knowing that Jesus is with them and providing for them. Standing strong also means showing forgiveness. Christians are playing the long game, forging relationships that



A Syrian girl waits as her family collect their relief pack. "It is a blessing that we can do this for them," says a church worker.

show Christ's love, even though they've been persecuted in the past. The discipling process means that they are very clear about their faith and sharing it. To them, following Jesus is all or nothing. And those who've discovered Christ as refugees say they can now deal with life and its difficulties much better because they've found this treasure.

Are you coming along to *Standing Strong*?

Yes, it's really exciting that Pastor Jamal is coming to speak. I'm looking forward to hearing more about his church's ministry, what they're currently facing, and how God is building His kingdom in that community.

DON'T MISS PASTOR JAMAL AT STANDING STRONG! **

We will also be hearing from speakers from India and Nigeria. Spaces are limited, so book now to ensure your place for this very special event.

BIRMINGHAM:
 Closing date
 Sunday 1 October

BELFAST:
 Closing date
 Sunday 8 October

Discount for Partner Churches - why not bring a busload?
 For booking details and more, see enclosed *Standing Strong* flier.

**A video of Pastor Jamal's talk will be shown at the Belfast event

8 IRAN



Leader:
Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

Population:
80.9 million
(800,000 Christians)

Main religion:
Islam

Government:
Islamic republic

Source of persecution:
Islamic extremism



CHRISTIANITY: A 'CRIME AGAINST THE STATE'

Christians in Iran face extreme persecution. Under the country's conservative interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law), converts from Islam to Christianity pay the greatest price for their faith.

For ethnic Persians, who are seen as Muslims, the penalty for leaving Islam is death for a man and life imprisonment for a woman – although this has not been carried out for over 20 years. Conducting any Christian activities or having Bibles in Farsi, the Persian language, is forbidden.

For historically Christian peoples, like the Armenians and Assyrians, and for non-traditional Christian denominations, proselytising to historically Muslim peoples is illegal. But despite this, the church in Iran is growing.

SONGS SUNG AND FAITH RENEWED FOR YOUNG IRANIAN CHRISTIANS

Both Bibles and youth meetings are forbidden, but this hasn't stopped young Iranians from hearing God's Word. Recently, a group of new believers secretly met in a Middle Eastern country to take part in discipleship seminars, talk about persecution, and, importantly, worship freely together.

"When we worship together, I really feel like my relationship with the Lord is renewed," says Mozhgan*.

Seventeen-year-old Iranian worship leader, Kyana*, agrees. "We have to keep our voices down so the neighbours don't report us to the police," she says of her church in Iran. Her house church was once supported by a more experienced fellowship, but after a series of arrests, they lost

contact with each other. "It didn't only make me scared, it also made me question God. Why did he leave us on our own?"

"When we worship together, I really feel like my relationship with the Lord is renewed"

To deal with her struggles, Kyana wrote a worship song which she sings to the group:

*You know that I am present everywhere.
You know I am with you.
You know I am the only power and ruler.
I know your heart might sometimes become sad.
I know your mind might sometimes become afraid.
Did you know my spirit is present in every single heart of yours?
Did you know I gave my life on the cross for you?
You know I am alive. You know I am here with you.
I know you believe that, in me, you are eternal.*

Many of the young believers at this gathering have faced isolation and persecution because of their faith. But through these seminars, they learn how to stand strong. "My spiritual life was going downhill before I came here, but this conference has inspired me to serve the Lord passionately again," says Nagmeh* (22). "I want to share everything I have learned with the other young people in my network."



You can listen to Kyana's song by visiting www.opendoorsuk.org/iran

PRISONER UPDATE

Arrested in May last year, Christians Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie, Mohammad Reza Omidi and Youcef Nadarkhani were each sentenced in July to ten years' imprisonment – Omidi and Nadarkhani also face two additional years in exile in southern Iran.

Azerbaijani men, Eldar Gurbanov, Yusif Farhadov and Bahram Nasibov, and Iranian convert Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh were arrested at a wedding in Tehran last year. Each have now been sentenced to ten years in prison – the Azerbaijanis, who were deported back to their homes, should not have to serve the jail term if they do not return to Iran.

Church leader Victor Bet-Tamraz, and converts Kaviyan Fallah-Mohammadi and Hadi Asgari were sentenced to ten years in prison each. Fellow convert, Amin Afshar Naderi, was given an additional five-year sentence (15 in all) for 'insulting the sacred' (blasphemy) in early July. In protest to his harsh sentence, Amin Afshar Naderi subsequently wrote an open letter to the Iranian government asking what he had done to 'make you hate me this much'. He then went on hunger strike to terminate his life but, praise God, on 25 July Naderi was released on bail.

Many of these believers will also have to pay fines ranging from £20,000-£70,000 each.

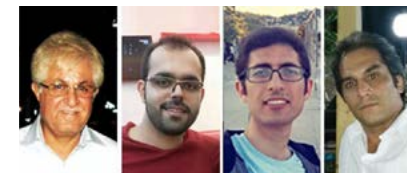
Praise God! Christian convert Maryam Naghash Zargarani has finally been released after over four years in prison. While imprisoned, Maryam was harassed and repeatedly denied medical treatment for longstanding medical issues. Please pray for her health and adjustment to life outside of prison.



FROM LEFT Saheb Fadaie, Youcef Nadarkhani, Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Mohammad Reza Omidi



FROM LEFT Bahram Nasibov, Eldar Gurbanov, Yusif Farhadov and Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh



FROM LEFT Victor Bet-Tamraz, Amin Afshar Naderi, Kaviyan Fallah-Mohammadi and Hadi Asgari
Images: World Watch Monitor



Maryam has been released from prison

FEAR OF CHRISTIANITY GROWS

Seen as a 'dangerous' Western ideology, Christianity is considered a threat to the Islamic identity of the Republic – and the government is arresting more and more believers in response to this.

In 2016, at least 193 Christians were arrested or imprisoned in Iran – a rise of over 90 per cent from the year before (108 recorded arrests). This summer, 12 Christians were sentenced to ten years or more in prison each for crimes 'against the state', such as evangelism.

An Open Doors research expert says: "Some of the believers were also charged with 'promoting Zionist Christianity', which reveals the connections the Iranian government sees between Christianity, the West and their arch-enemy Israel. Hence

*Name changed for security reasons

why the government views their activities as an attempt to undermine the state."

Yet many believers think it is worth the risk. And more are coming to Christ.

To learn more about persecution in Iran and how to pray for believers there go to www.opendoorsuk.org/iran

→ PRAY

- Praise God that the gospel is spreading and young people are engaging with it
- That imprisoned believers would have hope and peace and take comfort in the Lord.

Source: Open Doors, MEC

WELCOME HOME?



OUT OF THE ASHES, HOPE CAN RISE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

This is all that's left of 12-year-old Noah's house in Iraq. "We want to return. This is our land," he says. But this simply won't be possible without your help. His family fled with nothing, and the Iraqi government aren't helping them rebuild.

Your prayers and gifts have kept hope alive for over 30,000 families in Iraq and Syria, providing emergency relief and trauma care, repairing homes and creating jobs. You can't help them all – but you could make all the difference to one family, helping them rebuild their hope for the future.

Every £25 could go towards rebuilding a home or setting up a family in employment in Iraq

Every £42 could provide a month's emergency food supplies for a displaced family in Syria

Help rebuild hope today.

Give, pray, sign the global petition, and ask others to sign it too. Use the enclosed response form, visit www.opendoorsuk.org or call 01993 460015.



OpenDoors

HOPE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST