Flowers in the desert

How God is working through Christians in Iraq to bring life out of devastation
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through the Open Doors Frontline Partner monthly giving program

By giving $30 a month
you can provide your persecuted family with critical support and emergency relief.

BE THERE FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS, NO MATTER WHAT.

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About Open Doors
For over 60 years, Open Doors has worked in the world’s most oppressive countries, empowering Christians who are persecuted for their faith.

Open Doors Core Values
We are part of the Body of Christ; a people-to-people people
We are persecuted church-driven
We are people of the Bible
We are people of prayer
We live and work by faith
We are devoted to Jesus Christ and His commission
We are motivated solely for the glory of God

ON THE COVER
Dalia is a Christian in Iraq who has helped start a women’s ministry. God is working through her—and through your support—to bring life to dry places in Iraq. Read her story on page 14.

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PO Box 27001 Santa Ana, CA 92799
September / October 2020 | Volume 5
‘Jesus has done a lot of miracles for us’

By Christopher Summers

One Syrian woman explains how Jesus has sustained Christians in spite of everything

Bombs exploded near Sozan’s house on that day in October 2019. Her house is near Syria’s border with Turkey, and the Turkish military had begun their offensive into northern Syria.

A huge explosion shook the house. “We were so afraid,” Sozan says. “We prayed a lot. We heard sounds of the explosions. Two bombs fell close to our house. But when this was happening, Hannan, the wife of [Open Doors’ local partner] Pastor George, called us and offered us to come to [a safer] place. We ran out of our house and we saw more people running. We stayed in the house of the pastor.” After some days, things calmed down.

It was just one moment, but it was yet another place where this specific church has made a difference.

Since the start of the Syrian civil war almost 10 years ago, Open Doors has stood with the local church to help Christians—believers who are forced to flee war, threatened by extremists, persecuted and who lost everything.

When we met with the 22-year-old Sozan and her family, the situation in Qamishli had calmed down. Bombs are not falling anymore. But the situation remains complicated—and coronavirus has complicated it even more since we spoke with Sozan.

Sozan and her family are new believers who came from Islam. This is one of the families you supported when the bombs fell in 2019.

“I am from a Muslim background,” Sozan says by way of introduction. “I wasn’t deeply involved with Islam and I didn’t have peace, I had no love, I felt hatred in my heart.”

About 90 percent of Syrians are Muslim. There are no reliable current statistics, but before the crisis in Syria, an estimated 7 percent to 8 percent of the population—2.2 million at that time—were Christians. It’s estimated only 744,000 believers remain. So many Christians have fled the country that some churches are nearly empty. And yet, the empty spots left by those believers are being filled by new believers who are finding Jesus.

Sozan’s brother was the first person who told her about Jesus. She started reading the Bible. “When I started to read, I read this verse in Matthew 11:28: ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,’” she remembers. “Jesus touched my heart with that verse. There is no other Savior than Jesus. I went through a lot of difficulties, but I am in His hands, He helped me to pass the problems. ‘I will be with you, don’t be afraid,’ Jesus promises.”

Sozan went to church for the first time. “There I saw that there was no other solution for me than Jesus,” she

“I wasn’t deeply involved with Islam and I didn’t have peace, I had no love, I felt hatred in my heart.”
Frontline Faith

“The Holy Spirit started to work in me.”

Sozan and her family are one of the Syrian families that are helped through a local church that has become a Center of Hope—an Open Doors-supported program to create community outreach resources for Christians. These places helped Syrian Christians during the Turkish incursion in fall 2019 and have been helping distribute emergency aid during the coronavirus crisis.

“We really were in a poor situation; we are so thankful for the help we got. Also, in persecution the church stood with us,” Sozan says. “We received relief items, we got shelter when we faced persecution. God told His children to help others like us. Through that, we are feeling that God is with us—that He is not leaving us at all.”

She dreams that many more Syrians will know the Lord Jesus. “I can say, life for us was like hell before we came to Jesus,” she says. “[It was] like living in a forest full of monsters. I would like you also to pray that we will come out of this swamp of persecution. Jesus has done a lot of miracles for us. We can’t thank and worship Him enough for that.”

When asked what else we could pray for her and her family, she says: “Please pray for our nation, pray for salvation for everyone. Pray that God will open the eyes of the people, that they might accept Jesus. Pray for God’s protection for us when we leave our houses.”

says. “The Holy Spirit started to work in me.” She pauses. Her voice breaks, tears run over her cheeks. She grabs a tissue to wipe her nose. She then takes a deep breath and continues her story.

“People in the neighborhood started talking negative about us, as we were open about our conversion,” she says. “One day, I think about six weeks after my conversion, I was out with my sister Arya. A group of men came to hurt us, to persecute us. We were afraid, both of us were crying. We were so afraid we would be killed. But then Jesus appeared to me. He said to me: ‘Don’t be afraid.’ Then the people all of a sudden disappeared; they even apologized. That can only be God’s work.”

Though she sheds some tears, Sozan has a positive outlook. “Persecution is for the glory of God, so it is OK with us,” she says. “Jesus says that in the world we will face difficulties, but that He has overcome the world.

“Jesus is the only one who gives me eternal life,” she says. “He is the one who says He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. I now have a beautiful life. I continue to pray to Jesus—when I do so, I won’t be in trouble. I won’t hide my faith. Why should I? Less than a year ago, I was baptized.”
Impact Report:
OPEN DOORS’ COVID-19 RAPID RESPONSE

Open Doors rushes life-saving aid to more than 100,000 believers in Asia

“We are yearning for simple bread. I can’t feed my children.”

This cry for help from Usha,* a Christian mother in India, echoed the many thousands of messages our partners received from hungry and near-starving believers everywhere from India and Vietnam to Syria and Nigeria.

Usha is a day laborer but, because of COVID-19 lockdowns, hasn’t been able to work. And no one had delivered aid to her village. Out of desperation, she called her pastor. When he contacted our partners in the field, they rushed Usha an emergency food kit that helped her and her family for weeks.

So far, Open Doors has rushed approximately 18,500 food relief kits (including flour, rice, tea, cooking oil, potatoes, soap, masks and sanitizer) to believers in Asia. In other areas, such as Syria, Nigeria and the Gulf region, we helped ministry partners provide food for hungry families and also supplied masks and gloves to Christian nurses who didn’t receive any protective gear when their Muslim co-workers did.

This kind of discrimination and bias against Christians was (and still is) a consistent message. Repeatedly, we heard how our family in India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Malaysia and Nigeria were either bypassed completely by government aid because of their faith or received significantly less than Muslims.

In Bangladesh, some Christians were told, “We will give you food if you come back to Islam.”

In each area, Open Doors responded when we heard these cries of injustice and desperation. Here, we share powerful images of compassion and relief in action. Because of your prayers and support, the people you see in these photos, their families—and thousands of others like them—did not go hungry during this global crisis.
“Thank you for extending your love to us. You are a friend in need and woe. God bless you.”
—Lovlu Sadik,* a Christian mother in Bangladesh

“I am very thankful. We were unsure of our survival, but this provision has brought us hope and relief.”
—Ruth, a Christian mother in Nepal

“The church in Syria could not see their congregations suffer from lack of security, shortage of food and the new health threat and do nothing about it.”
—Mourad,* an Open Doors ministry partner in Syria

“I have never imagined that I would receive such gifts. Indeed, He who watches over the widows neither sleeps nor slumbers. This support will enable me to care for my family.”
—Rose,* a recent widow in Nigeria whose pastor-husband was killed right before quarantines began
**SRI LANKA**

*Sri Lankan church shows Christ to persecutors*

Kumar*, a believer in Sri Lanka, was on his way to church when several villagers attacked him. Just a few months later, the Sri Lankan church provided food for his attackers, helping them feed their families.

The church saw that villagers—the same ones who have attacked the church and even beaten church members like Kumar—needed food during COVID-19 lockdowns.

With help from Open Doors, the church provided for 100 families. Their generosity opened up new doors to share the gospel with their persecutors, says Pastor Shiyanth*.

“Doing this gave us more opportunities to share the gospel and show the love of Christ,” he says.

“I see a great renewal within the church. Even the local government representative in the village has changed his attitude towards the Christian community. We are building better relationships with the people now. More people are eager to know the Lord.”

Pray the church’s compassion will draw more to Christ.

**MYANMAR**

*Persecuted pastor provides safehouse in Myanmar*

Pastor J. Caleb*, an Open Doors partner in Myanmar, must watch his every move.

“It’s very dangerous if I do not know how to behave among the Buddhist community,” he explains. “If I do something inappropriate, I could be stoned, beaten or beheaded.”

Despite the risk, Pastor Caleb continues his ministry to persecuted believers. With your support, he started a small business. The money he raises from it allows him to maintain a safehouse for believers and teach persecution preparedness to Christians in a place where converts from Buddhism face intense pressure from their family and community, as well as Buddhist extremists.

“I built a tent in the paddy field for the believers to live in temporarily,” he shares. “With the small amount of money left over, I spent it to support Bible students. Pray for Myanmar to have freedom of religion, and for me as I share the good news. God bless you.”

**INDONESIA**

*The impact of gratitude*—After an Open Doors leadership training in the Mentawi Islands off Indonesia’s western coast, villagers made and gave our team a boat to aid them as they travel the islands.

Leadership is desperately needed. There are five churches on the islands but only one pastor. The rest are run by elders with no theological background. Because believers aren’t deeply rooted, they are an easy target for Islamic conversion.

“They are the new leaders, the hope of around 220 Christian families here,” says Budi*, who works with Open Doors to train these villagers. “God is using their new skills and knowledge in this uncertain time.”

*Names changed for security reasons*
Despite the risk of being jailed, imprisoned or even killed if their participation in a house church is discovered, believers who worship behind closed doors shared the love of Christ to their community during the peak of COVID-19.

Our field reported how secret Christians reached out to their communities that have been hit so hard by coronavirus and the impact of the country’s lockdowns. First, they used their own resources to give to others in need. When their personal resources ran out, they reached out to Open Doors ministry partners, who in turn contacted field workers like Steve.*

“[House churches] have become used to living in difficult circumstances,” Steve says. “They felt it was their calling to take care of people around them—not only other believers but also neighbors, colleagues or others nearby who were struggling. The [people these churches helped] thought no one cared about them.”

Iranian Christians have shared encouraging messages they’ve received from non-believers:

“If this is the God who thinks about and takes care of His children, then I would like to know Him more!” —daughter of a church member

“I had almost reached the point to say the world is absolutely dark, but now I see there are still some good people with good hearts living in this world and they are Christians!” —17-year-old family member of a church member

Pray with us that these seeds would take root.

**ETHIOPIA**

‘I had given up hope’—how your letters changed this Ethiopian’s life

Marta was a toddler when her Ethiopian family gave her to their village’s local witch doctor as his servant and wife. They believed he would bless them if they gave their daughter to him.

Although we don’t know all the details of her suffering as she grew up in his house, we know she endured significant abuse. We also know that God was working in Marta’s pain. Secretly, a family member was sharing the gospel with her. While she was a slave, Marta came to faith—following Christ in secret.

When she was in her mid-teens, she was released. Marta took the bold step of telling her family she was a Christian. But they quickly shunned her for leaving Islam and their tribal customs.

In 2018, after hearing her story, Open Doors supporters sent bags of letters to Marta to encourage the young girl.

“I’m so excited about these cards,” Marta said. “I had given up hope that I had brothers and sisters who loved me. But God has given you to me. This moves me deeply.”

Thankfully, today Marta has reconciled with her family. She shared the gospel with them and, through her testimony and other circumstances, everyone except her father put their faith in Christ.

**IRAN**

Iran’s secret church risks to serve hard-hit communities

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Pray with us that these seeds would take root.
In August 2014, I stood under the hot sun of Iraq watching one of the great tragedies of our time unfold. With ISIS encamped only a few miles away and warplanes flying overhead, masses of displaced men, women and children huddled together in the relative safety of the city of Erbil.

Christians from the Nineveh Plains—faced with a choice of submitting to ISIS rule, execution or retreat—had fled their homes and left almost everything behind. The Yazidis, a religious group known to few outside of Iraq before, had fared even worse. Messages were relayed to me and my colleague from those still outside the city—messages calling for help as ISIS surrounded villages and resistance was swept aside. We could only helplessly relay these messages to the U.S. consulate and pray.

As I met with church leaders and U.N. officials in Erbil, 150 miles to our west ISIS began systematically executing hundreds of Yazidis in the village of Kocho. They were buried in mass graves, while hundreds more were enslaved and led away. The messages stopped coming in, but it would be a long time before anyone fully understood what had taken place. The massacre at Kocho would turn out to just be one of many.

I have never returned from any trip to the field more determined to advocate for those facing persecution. Initially, the priority was simply to keep people alive, and advocating for aid to be swiftly and effectively distributed was key. Eventually, restoring and rebuilding from the destruction became the focus, and that work continues today.

Yet as I think back on that terrible time, there is something else that comes to mind. Amidst all of the suffering, sadness and loss, I saw an incredible resilience of faith. Many gave almost everything to help those who had nothing, including their homes, their food and their money. Some told me how thankful they were to be alive, and how wonderful their neighbors, pastors and visitors had been to them. Some talked of the day when they would be able to finish school or restart the family business they had lost. To see such gratitude and, even more so, hope in the face of such terrible circumstances humbled me in a way I have rarely experienced.

Iraq, and the Middle East at large, continues to be one of the most significant challenges in the world for those advocating for religious freedom. To cite just a few of the major issues we work to confront:

- In Iraq, continued international support is needed in the ongoing rebuilding and stabilization of the Nineveh Plains, home to the majority of the remaining Christians.
- In Egypt, Article 98(f) of the Egyptian Penal Code criminalizes blasphemy, a charge used to intimidate and imprison Christians and anyone who wishes to convert to Christianity. Egyptian laws on identity cards and the construction of churches also substantially curtail religious freedom.
- In Iran, the routine imprisonment of Christians and other religious minorities, sometimes for extended periods, for simply practicing or sharing their faith continues to go unchecked.
- In Saudi Arabia, converting to Christianity, or any faith other than Sunni Islam, is criminalized and punished. Sentencing for violators can include execution. No non-Sunni places of worship are allowed to exist openly.
- In Libya, armed groups almost exclusively hostile to Christians continue to wage war. Outside help will almost certainly be needed if peace, and some degree of safety for Christians, is ever to be realized.

The list goes on and on, but it should not be cause to despair. If anything, my time in Iraq and my visits to the Middle East since have taught me just how resilient people can be, even under the worst of circumstances. The smallest glimmer of hope sometimes serves as the spark that propels others to, in turn, give more of themselves. In our advocacy work on behalf of Christians in the Middle East, we must continue to provide those glimmers whenever we can, no matter how small they may sometimes be.
WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH GOD'S PEOPLE,
STANDING STRONG FOR HIM IN PLACES WHERE
FOLLOWING JESUS CAN COST THE MOST

EGYPT

3,000 Christians cry out:
‘Please don’t take away our church!’

The cries of the women at the church gate came from the bottom of their hearts: “Please don’t take away our church.” That day, 3,000 Christians watched as authorities bulldozed their 15-year-old church building, destroying the place where they had married, baptized their children and said their last goodbyes to loved ones.

Their “crime”? Construction. When the church began to add two stories to their building to make more room for Sunday school classes, Muslim extremists attacked—fortunately stopped by moderate Muslims. But the extremists didn’t give up. Out of protest, they illegally built a mosque on the farm land right next to the church, church member Bishoy says. “Our village already has four mosques; another wasn’t really needed,” he says. “On top of that, they built it without a foundation.”

The solution the local authorities came up with was as brutal as it was incomprehensible. The village mayor ordered the destruction of the illegal mosque and the legal church building.

When the congregation resisted, Muslim extremists, along with police officials, insulted the priest and hit him so badly he fainted. Then they fired tear gas at church members and hurt even women and children. That day, they arrested 14 church members, including a man whose arm was broken by the attackers.

“They demolished all the concrete columns of the three stories of the church building,” Bishoy says. “They demolished the altar, sanctuaries and destroyed Christian books.” The demolition took six hours. Then the bulldozer continued to the mosque and knocked down just one wall.

The church is the only one in their village of Kom Al-Darah. The nearest building is nine miles away; most members don’t have the means to travel that far. Bishoy asks, “Please pray for us.”

PLEASE PRAY FOR THE COMFORT AND STRENGTH OF THESE BELIEVERS. PRAY THAT THEY WOULD BE ABLE TO REBUILD AND, IN THE MEANTIME, FIND WAYS TO SAFELY GATHER FOR PRAYER AND WORSHIP.
In north Vietnam, 18 Christian families were denied government aid—intended to help people during the coronavirus lockdown—because of their faith.

“YOU ARE CHRISTIANS AND YOUR GOD SHALL TAKE CARE OF YOUR FAMILY!” AUTHORITIES TOLD THEM. “THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR FAMILIES!”

Our Open Doors teams knew we needed to do something. So our local partners provided sacks of rice to these families—but even this wasn’t easy. Fifteen minutes after they began their distribution, local authorities demanded they stop.

One of our partners, Pastor Foom*, bravely faced the authorities. “Our church donated these sacks of rice to help them in this difficult time,” he told them.

But the local authorities didn’t yield. They demanded Open Doors’ partners pack up and leave the village immediately. To avoid more complications, Open Doors’ partners took the sacks of rice to a different village where a believer willingly opened his house to store the aid, despite the risk. Each household received about 55 pounds of rice.

A recipient expressed his gratitude: “I would like to say thank you so much to our brothers and sisters,” he said. “Thank you for supporting us in this difficult time. The rice will help our families to have food in the coming days. May God bless your hearts.

In the DRC, times are dangerous and complex with dozens of militias terrorizing communities in eastern Congo where conflict rages. Rev. Batsemire-Ngulongo Yese, 67, and his wife, 52-year-old Francoise, served God in this difficult area for many years. Until the attack.

They were working on their farm outside the town of Eringite, an area known as the “triangle of death.”

“The couple and their grandson heard the gunshots. But by then, the gunmen were too close,” Francoise says.

“In that moment of panic, we thought it wise to hide in the bush in case the enemy was on the road,” Francoise says, speaking exceptionally slowly, almost in whispers.

After about 45 minutes, she and her grandson came out of hiding. Yese, however, was missing. Two hours later, they received the tragic news that he had unknowingly hidden in an area the group used as a shortcut. They shot and killed him with the very machete he was carrying to use at his farm.

Family members now take turns sitting with Francoise, who is suffering both physically and emotionally.

PRAY WITH FRANCOISE AS SHE GRIEVES THE LOSS OF YESE, HER HUSBAND AND MINISTRY PARTNER. PRAY WITH THEIR CHURCH AND AREA BELIEVERS WHO ARE SCARED AND FEAR FURTHER ATTACKS.
**CHINA**

They were worshiping on Sunday morning in a private home when police banged at the door, kicked it down and began dragging out believers

In southeast China, reportedly hundreds of police raided a meeting of the unregistered Xingguang Church with no warning. Persecution continues to rise in China—pray for both courage and discernment among believers.

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**EGYPT**

Christian girls and women disappearing—forced to convert to Islam

Egyptian Christian Ranya Abd al-Masih, a mother of three daughters in north Cairo, is one of hundreds of girls and women abducted by Muslim extremists in Egypt to forcibly convert them to Islam.

A few days after Ranya disappeared, a video emerged of her saying she had converted to Islam and wanted no contact with her family. Her family and church community don’t believe she converted out of free will but was abducted and forced to convert for fear of harm to her family. Response from authorities, they say, has been discouraging.

The recent case is indicative of an ongoing epidemic in Egypt: Extremists abduct Christian girls and even married women and force them to convert to Islam. Hundreds have been reported missing. Sometimes nothing is heard from them again and sometimes they reappear, announcing a conversion to Islam.

This is what’s happening to Christians throughout the streets of Egypt today.

**INDIA**

Christians bypassed for food rations because they follow Jesus

We continue to hear that our brothers and sisters in India don’t receive the food relief that others are getting from the government as a result of COVID-19. As our partners delivered food aid to Christians, they shared their stories of injustice:

- **A family of five** shared that the police have been threatening them because they are Christians and do ministry. Everyone in their village received government relief aid, except for the Christian families.
- **A disabled Christian man, Nathan,* and his family of six were bypassed for relief. He can’t walk, but still the local people won’t give him and his family any food. The family has been opposed by the village since they came to faith.
- **Another Christian, Gerard,* was expelled from his village and after living elsewhere for some time, he attempted to return home. The village chief tried to force him out again. While everyone else in the village received food rations, Gerard was neglected.

*Representative names used for security reasons

PRAY WITH FAMILIES LIKE THESE WHO ARE DEPENDENT ON FOOD DELIVERIES FROM CHRISTIANS. ASK GOD TO PROTECT OUR PARTNERS AS THEY DELIVER EMERGENCY RELIEF AND SPIRITUAL ENCOURAGEMENT.
How Dalia in Iraq is bringing new life to a place that was left for dead

By Sarah Bos
Like many communities on the Plains, there are Christians in this town—but also Yezidis, Shabaks and Muslims. Just behind the mountain, a centuries-old monastery is a silent reminder of the historic presence of Christians in this area. The Christians here trace their lineage back to the days of Jesus’ disciples—Peter even sent his greetings to the church in this region in 1 Peter.

Dalia lives in a quiet corner of this town with her family—her husband Ghader, three young adult children and their white chihuahua. They have visited the monastery—a physical connection to their historical faith—but her first memories are of her grandmother’s garden, not far away from where we sit now. She remembers playing with her nieces and nephews, eating with the whole family, going to church together. They are beautiful memories … but they are now bittersweet.

That’s because Dalia won’t make new memories here with her extended family. “I am the only one of my extended family that’s still here,” she says. “The others all fled Iraq because of the persecution.”

Dalia has known persecution as long as she can remember, but the most painful memory is the brutal murder of her uncle in the city of Mosul in 2006. He was one of the Christians killed by Islamic extremists to tell people following Jesus that they didn’t belong in Iraq. “During my uncle’s funeral, my father got a call,” Dalia remembers. “[The person on the phone said] if we didn’t give my uncle’s murderers a certain amount of money, they would kill my brother, too. So, we stopped the funeral and started to collect the money.”

It’s a cloudy day on the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq. A fresh breeze accompanies the breathtaking view of the mountains that surround the small city of around 40,000 people.

This area isn’t technically a desert like much of Iraq, but it’s still very dry—scrub brush and small plants dot the surrounding hillscape.
Iraqi believers Ghader and Dalia have returned with their family to the Nineveh Plains, but it’s not an easy life. “Our bags are always packed in case we have to flee again,” Dalia says.

The memories visibly touch Dalia, but despite the pain of the stories, she is surprisingly to the point about what she had to endure for her faith. “It is written in the Bible that those who believe in Jesus will be persecuted, and we know that very well,” she says. “This doesn’t mean these events didn’t affect me; I was crying the whole way when we fled, but it never affected my faith. The persecution made me cling to God even more.

“\textit{I remember being so anxious. We left our house that we had spent years building and ran into the unknown, with not much more than the clothes on our back.}”
Open Doors started the Centers of Hope project in Iraq and Syria several years ago. Centers of Hope are active, local churches that are supported with a number of hope-giving projects, including projects to:

- Grow ministry for women, youth and couples, and to strengthen discipleship efforts
- Build healthy leaders and create trauma awareness, with members involved in tasks such as teaching and pastoral care
- Inspire Christians to find their prophetic voice and speak up about injustice
- Rebuild healthy incomes and livelihoods for Christians and reach out with Christ’s love into the community

The exact activities differ from Center to Center. Larger programs, such as those for church leaders and the year-long trauma awareness course, are shared between several churches. Sometimes Open Doors partners with other organizations in supporting a church.

Centers of Hope provide what the Christians of Iraq and Syria need right now: hope and new perspective. They need this to accomplish their dream of becoming a beacon of light in their societies. Without our help, many Christians would lose hope completely and find ways to leave the country. Christianity in Iraq and Syria would dwindle even more, if not disappear.

Thanks to the gifts and prayers of Open Doors supporters, in Iraq, 65 percent of all churches (about 125 congregations) have been transformed into Centers of Hope. In Syria, 20 percent of churches (about 110 congregations) have transformed into a Center of Hope or are part of a larger Center of Hope. Through our local partners, we help these Centers of Hope to grow stronger, while also reaching out to the churches we haven’t connected with yet.

To find out how you can help continue the vital work of the Centers of Hope, visit OpenDoorsUSA.org/Centers-of-Hope
Finding new life in the desert

Coming back to the Nineveh Plains, Dalia felt she needed something to strengthen her faith and restore her self-confidence, and she saw some of the women around her needed it too. Together with some neighbors who felt the same, she decided to act. “We thought, what is a better place to gather than the church, and what better place to find hope than in the Bible?” she says.

“This group of women in Iraq has begun to intentionally study Scripture and grow in faith. “Open Doors trainers taught us how we could present the Lord Jesus to the women of our village and how to serve them in love,” Dalia says.

Through the giving of Open Doors supporters, the group of faith-driven women received training in setting up women's meetings. “The trainers taught us how we could present the Lord Jesus to the women of our village, how to serve them in love, communicate with them wisely and transmit hope,” Dalia says.

After the training, Dalia and her friends started organizing regular Bible study meetings for women. They also offer prayer...

“We feel more confident and peaceful.”
Listen to three women who participate in the Bible studies organized by the committee formed by Dalia:

**Samera**

“I attend all the meetings of the women’s ministry. Through these gatherings, we educate and develop ourselves. We learn about the Bible by studying it.

“After the meeting, I always talk about what I learned with my daughters, neighbors and friends.

“Not only did I learn a lot in these meetings, I also grew in confidence.”

**Lidya**

“Through these meetings, we grow closer to each other and closer to God. We read and study the Bible. I now educate myself with stories from the Bible. I like especially the stories from women in the Bible; they have become my role models in life.

“I like how the committee sets up the meetings—they are very creative. This way we are encouraged to attend every meeting.”

**Sarwa**

“I attend most of the meetings. I like to listen and come closer to God. The committee encourages us to participate, and they help us grow our confidence. Next to the lectures, we also have fun together: We eat and cook together and sometimes have lectures outdoors. The women’s ministry has broadened my view and changed the way I think.”

Growing closer to God

*Representative photos used to preserve security*
Shortly after our team left the Nineveh Plains, the COVID-19 pandemic reached Iraq. The country went into lockdown, and church buildings were closed. In these new circumstances, Dalia and the ladies of her town went online. Living rooms turned into little churches. Doing Bible study at home is not a very common activity among the traditional Christians in Iraq, but the participants of the women’s ministry group have learned Bible study skills in the meetings.

Throughout the pandemic, Dalia and the other women continued to receive support from the local field workers through the phone and internet. They even met up with women from other committees online to encourage each other, sharing how they dealt with the crisis and how they supported one another.

Fortunately, the pandemic didn’t seem to hit Iraq particularly hard. Regardless, Dalia stands strong for Jesus in Iraq. She knows in every situation, in every crisis, there is only one thing she can do: Rely on the Lord. “I always remember the words of the apostle Paul and repeat them in my head,” she says. “I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”

“I pray a lot, and when I do it leads me to the Lord. When my prayers are deep and from the heart, I hear the voice of God inside of me, and the Holy Spirit speaks to my inner being.”

— Dalia
Pastor George has been instrumental in helping believers in northern Syria weather a series of crises. And you have helped!

After nine years of civil war, the Christians of northern Syria were exhausted. The war has left the region in shambles—economic turmoil seems to never end, and former ISIS fighters occupy camps scattered throughout the north of Syria.

And then, on October 9, 2019, Turkey invaded, bombing cities and sparking fears among the estimated 50,000 Christians in northern Syria that ISIS would rise again. When Turkey stopped their offensive, church leaders hoped it would be a time to rebuild and refocus.

Until the coronavirus pandemic swept into the region in early 2020.

It was like adding insult to injury. The Christian community in northern Syria has faced ISIS, years of war, an aggressive Turkish military and now ... a global pandemic?

Many Christians have left Syria because of the war. Before the conflict, there were a little over 2 million Christians in the country—now it's estimated under 750,000 remain. It’s a community stretched to the brink, and you’d be forgiven if you thought the future of Christianity in Syria might be in doubt.

Thank God, you’d be wrong.

Like everywhere in Syria, Pastor George Moushi’s church in Qamishli has seen many of its members leave. During a recent service, 70 people sat on white plastic chairs (covered with soft cushions to make them more comfortable) and listened attentively to the man in the front. But the 70 people there were not necessarily the same ones who occupied those seats a few years ago.

“The seats that became empty were filled with others again,” Pastor George says. The sad thing is that “several equipped persons left—several persons who at some point were leaders.” He starts naming them, one by one—he gets to a dozen church workers who left.

But Pastor George hasn’t given up. “Of course, God did not leave us,” he says. “A lot of people accepted Christ and were added to the church. Although the war was so awful, God turned ashes into beauty—a lot of people came to Christ.”

Pastor George’s church is a place of hope—and what God is doing in northern Syria, despite everything, is incredible.

Finding hope in the brokenness

Qamishli is home to more churches, but Pastor George’s is the only church meeting in a non-official church building. When he and his wife decided to start a church, they began by opening their own home. “We started to have our meetings,” he remembers. “In the beginning, only two or three people came. The church grew and the leadership of the Alliance Church in Syria asked us to start a church. We bought land for a church building—and we are building now in that place.”

Even without a church building, Pastor George’s church has become a source of peace and hope in Qamishli. As people in northern Syria experienced urgent needs because of displacement from ISIS and the
terrible economic situation, the church started—through the gifts of Open Doors’ faithful supporters—helping the neediest families. “We helped with relief, with all kinds of humanitarian help, but also, we supported students,” Pastor George says. “For some families, the church arranged housing, [and] one family was supported to flee to another city in the country.”

Because of this help, the doors were opened wide for the gospel. All help was given unconditionally to the people. “But we offered always the message of Jesus too, depending how open the door was. We didn’t only want to fill the stomach of the people,” Pastor George says. “Through our programs, we tried to build relationships with the people that opened doors for them to know Jesus. The best hope we can offer is the hope that Jesus Christ offers.”

The church saw growth because of this—even though so many Christians had to flee during the war. Pastor George even witnessed Muslims who accepted Jesus as Lord as a result of the crisis. “The war made people think about their life,” he says. “They thought, ‘Where will I go after my death?’ The war made people from a Muslim background question their faith. When the church started visiting them, they began to understand about God’s love. We show them that God is love and that God loves people. Some came to faith, and they come to church.”

Now, 25–30 percent of the 70 people who fill Pastor George’s apartment church are from a Muslim background. “Islam forbids a Muslim to become a Christian,” Pastor George says. “It even says that a person should be killed. It is a danger to become a Christian. The new believers know this, but it’s OK for them. They are not afraid to be killed. A lot of them openly declared their faith, [even though] they know they might lose their inheritance, their properties, they might be threatened—and some are. Some of the new believers were threatened with death, but, thank God, they were not killed.

**Taking care of people—in Jesus’ name**

Because of these experiences, Pastor George’s church was ready to respond when Turkey sent troops into northern Syria in late 2019—and again when the coronavirus pandemic took root in Syria.

During the Turkish incursion, through the help and prayers of Open Doors supporters, Pastor George was able to minister on the ground immediately, even as bombs fell on his city. “We visited these families and encouraged them, some of those we offered cash support and give them coupons for food,” he remembers. “Some of the displaced families came to Qamishli, [and] they only had the clothes they were wearing when they fled. It was so cold in the camps where they first stayed. We helped them with warm clothes like jackets, socks—and some children we helped with shoes, as they came without. How could we show the love of God to them when we wouldn’t meet their most basic needs? In the letter of James, we learn that we should give people food to eat, that we should clothe them.”

After the Turkish incursion, Pastor George’s original plan for 2020 was to reduce the emergency food distribution and give only to the poorest and neediest. But when the coronavirus pandemic hit Syria, the church saw a need it knew it had to fill.

“At first, we stopped distributing relief packages,” Pastor George says. “But when we saw the increased need, we restarted the distribution. We gave people food and washing detergent coupons. Our church saw that now was a time to stand by the people, support them and show Jesus’ love in difficult times.

“We’re trying to help as much as we can with the means we have,” he told Open Doors last spring. “People are hungry. Some called me crying because they have no food for their kids and families. Especially displaced families who have no relatives here, so they can’t even ask to borrow money from anyone, just to keep them alive until this crisis ends. We’re in dire need of funds to support a larger number of families.”

The pastor knows he only can do this important work through the support of many Christians around the world. “Thank you for your help to make that possible,” he says to Open Doors supporters. “Please continue to help us in this. There is a lot of poverty; the fall of the Syrian [currency] affects everyone. Thank you for helping [Christians] to remain in Syria. Thank you for helping us. Please continue to help us.”

When asked what to pray for Syria, the pastor says: “Pray the people stay firm in Jesus. Pray that the economy will recover. The war isn’t over yet. Pray that Christians will stay in the country. Pray that their basic needs are met. I often see people searching the garbage bins for food in the street; the situation is bad. Pray that there will be job opportunities for the people.”
Spotlights

Brenda Lee Long
Connector

WHEN DID YOU REALIZE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH WAS GOD’S HEARTBEAT—AND YOUR HEARTBEAT AS WELL?
In the late ’70s, a young couple was meeting with a group of believers. I was invited to attend. The couple was preparing for a trip to smuggle Bibles into China. They were sharing and asking for the group to pray for them. When they returned, they were rejoicing [in how] the way things unfolded on their trip. They introduced me to Open Doors and told the story of Brother Andrew. That is when it began. And the heartbeat has never stopped beating.

AS AN OPEN DOORS CONNECTOR, HOW HAVE YOU SEEN GOD WORK THROUGH YOU?
[In sharing about persecuted Christians], at first, I saw a small interest by a few people, but as the time has gone on the interest has grown. I have been able to step out and speak to folks in a much easier way about the needs of the persecuted church.

HOW HAS THIS EXPERIENCE STRENGTHENED YOUR FAITH?
My faith has grown through a growing passion for the Church of Christ. Even the refusals of some [to listen] has increased my faith. I think sometimes, even though at first some may not be interested, when they see our commitment to never give up for the sake of the Church, some come back to ask questions. When you first build a relationship with a pastor or leader, this will eventually open the door to future interest. I find that giving packets of information to a pastor first, and praying without pushing the issue to go to their church to speak, will lead to future opportunities.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST FULFILLING PART OF BEING A CONNECTOR?
Seeing a young, single mother come to me at a conference and show a great amount of interest [in persecuted Christians]. And to see her face light up when I handed her my only copy of No Guts, No Glory [a book by Brother Andrew]. Later at the conference, she came back to me with a water bottle with “5¢” written on it and said, “Let’s collect bottles for Bibles [at the] next conference.” I hope we do this!

Melissa Coleman
Connector

WHEN DID YOU REALIZE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH WAS GOD’S HEARTBEAT—AND YOUR HEARTBEAT AS WELL?
There was no exact moment I can point to specifically. I would see articles from various sources, including Open Doors, [and] from sites I visited frequently. The more I learned, the more I was stunned about the reality of living for Christ [in places] other than the U.S. That’s when it became a passion and vision of mine to tell whoever I could about the persecuted church. I believe it was then that God’s inspiration was fully realized and put into action. I applied to become a Connector [a person who serves as a voice for the persecuted in their local church] with Open Doors.

AS AN OPEN DOORS CONNECTOR, HOW HAVE YOU SEEN GOD WORK THROUGH YOU?
God has used me through sharing stories and videos from Open Doors with others. I have seen people I’ve known for years start to read more articles on the topic. I would share anything I could on social media or through email, and I also hosted a monthly prayer group at my church. To see [the people in my group] now care about what’s happening overseas makes me determined to continue spreading stories [about persecuted Christians].

HOW HAS BEING A CONNECTOR STRENGTHENED YOUR FAITH?
This experience has strengthened my faith [exponentially], which is something I didn’t expect. The more I read and come to know about others’ persecution for their faith makes my own troubles pale in comparison.

But the most important detail God has shown me in my journey with the persecuted is how His Word and living for Him are the only things that matter. I have worked more now toward storing up my treasures in heaven [rather] than in this world. My relationship with God has grown stronger. To see what others face gives me more confidence in my walk with God.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST FULFILLING PART OF BEING A CONNECTOR?
The most fulfilling part of being a Connector is to see others start following persecuted organizations and sharing stories when they didn’t before. They speak out and say: “Hey! Look at this bad stuff that’s happening!” I absolutely love that. We have to pray for the persecuted.

On a personal level, the most fulfilling part is walking with the persecuted church. I feel like I walk with these people. I feel their pain and feel their strength. I feel bonded to them. I want to be a light for them through prayer and sharing their stories.
1 Question

WHAT HAS GOD TAUGHT YOU DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Pat McMichael Canington
Pray for everyone, stay in the Word, help when opportunity arises; be very thankful.

Kris Jensen
IT Director, Open Doors USA
One thing I have learned from this pandemic is when the pressure is off from busyness of life, a deeper connection with friends and family is produced.

Kabil*
North Africa
God taught me at the beginning of this crisis that I must preach! For the church it is a matter of this crisis that I must preach! For the world to repent. In both returning to its first love, and God taught me at the beginning that He is in control of all things; despite the total lockdown, God reminded me of Job’s story. Sometimes He allows situations to settle others. It is always said that “all things contribute to good...” (Romans 8:28). That’s what I’ve experienced personally.

Sue Lalwani
Administrative Assistant, Open Doors USA
That we are not in control of our plans. That was always the case, but this world pandemic is a profound reminder.

Rami*
North Africa
During this period of COVID-19, God reminded me and taught me that He is in control of all things; despite the total lockdown, God reminded me of Job’s story. Sometimes He allows situations to settle others. It is always said that “all things contribute to good...” (Romans 8:28). That’s what I’ve experienced personally.

Jaden*
Yemen
I have more time for discipleship with my brothers as my job stopped.

Gilbert Sandil
Syria
We had to pray at home [away from services and meetings]; that was new for me, but I enjoyed praying with my family and speaking with God as my friend.

Elias Hanna
Pastor, Syria
Having nothing to do made me sit down with God more than ever. I re-read the whole Bible and reflected on my behavior and attitude in the light of the Word. I repented for everything I did that wasn’t for the glory of God and decided to serve God in humility as the disciples did.

Donna Maki
Get closer to Him. Prayer and read the Word. He is and was and will be the answer.

Karim*
North Africa
During this period of pandemic, a thought often comes back to me. It is that all the things that God has allowed, He also controls; nothing escapes Him. This reminds me of the word that the Lord Jesus uttered the day before His arrest in the garden of Gethsemane (John 16:33).

Jan Vermeer
Open Doors field worker for Asia
In Asia, we see that millions of persecuted Christians aren’t receiving the help they need. One thing I’ve learned through this crisis is that God is where I am right now in Jesus’ name.

Evana Deeb
Syria
I asked God to show me His glory during the quarantine. I saw Him in the nature around me—in the birds, the trees, the clouds—every little detail showed me His presence. I also learned how important it is to share quality time with my family.

Jo Ellen Rather Bridges
I have learned so much. Here is the latest: praising God with no words. Just focusing on Him—and loving Him.

Michelle Miller
Donor Processing Specialist, Open Doors USA
Go straight to Him in all circumstances—do not concentrate on your emotions or surroundings. I go straight to Isaiah 41:10.

Maria Martinez
To rely on Him, to have my faith grow strong, that when I start feeling down I have to face God and remember Jesus placed His blood on the mercy seat and paid for me and for all.

*Pseudonym // Unless otherwise specified, responses taken from the Open Doors USA Facebook page.
Devotional

READ & REFLECT

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. — Isaiah 35:1–2,5–7

Sometimes it can be hard to see where God’s Kingdom is. We see so much brokenness—injustice, oppression, violence and, of course, persecution against God’s people—it can be hard to see God’s hand at work.

In this passage from Isaiah, God promises that eventually His people will inhabit a fully realized Kingdom of Heaven. And yet, Jesus repeatedly reminds us He has already lit the fire of the Kingdom through His life, death and resurrection. We will not see the fullness of God’s Kingdom until Jesus comes again, but, in the meantime, we work and live as loyal subjects of His Kingdom, living as He’s called us to live, spreading the good news and making disciples.

If we look around and hear the testimony of persecuted Christians, we can clearly see God at work—the flowers growing in the “desert and parched land” that Isaiah prophesies. In the places that seem the most deserted, where Christians are oppressed and attacked from every side, God is still there, caring for His people. Their testimonies tell of His faithfulness and remind all His followers He is a good God whose Kingdom has come, is here and will, someday, be fully realized.

PRAY

Father, we ask that You would give us eyes to see where Your Kingdom is sprouting up. We pray You would make us agents of Your Kingdom—that we might have the courage to live in the reality begun by Jesus. Thank you that Jesus defeated death and all evil by His death on the cross. We ask that You be with our persecuted sisters and brothers and give them courage to stand for You, and that we would have wisdom and compassion to help them. We ask that You would give them a special sense of the Holy Spirit, that they would feel Your presence in ways that give them the hope of Your Kingdom. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
When I read through the reports from Open Doors’ partners in the Middle East, they don’t always sound very hopeful.

Another attack. Another arrest. Another family struggling to survive.

Take, for example, the country of Syria. At No. 11 on Open Doors’ 2020 World Watch List, it’s one of the world’s worst persecutors of Christians. In the past nine years alone, Syria has endured a civil war, the rise of ISIS, a refugee and internal displacement crisis, a Turkish incursion and the coronavirus spreading among an already under-resourced people.

So, recently I sat down with Pastor Edward of Damascus to ask: “Where is the hope for Syria?”

His response was striking:

“We learned important lessons from the war we went through ... We learned to exercise our faith and trust in a good and wise God who loves us. This ignites our excitement, [as] we know that the Lord is doing something: His project in our country is not done yet.”

As steeped in bad news as the persecuted church can be, they are choosing to believe, as followers of Jesus, that He is working despite—and even through—all the suffering and difficulty.

Pastor Edward says his congregation isn’t resigned to despair—instead, they’re excited for what God is going to do next.

Hope from Habakkuk

“I see a lot of parallels between our situation and the book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament,” Pastor Edward said. “Habakkuk learned to cry out to God for help in very dark times. He asks God, ‘How long must I call for help?’ He looks forward to God’s answer. We have the same experience.”

Read through the book of Habakkuk and notice how God responds to humanity’s outcries. When the prophet complains of destruction, violence and injustice, God says:

“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told” (Habakkuk 1:5).

An incredible promise—but it’s hard to be hopeful when you’re surrounded by conflict.

Again, Habakkuk cries out: “Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?” God replies, “Though it linger, wait for it ... the righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (Habakkuk 2:4-5).

This time, Habakkuk responds in faith. He says, essentially, “God, I believe you”:

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Habakkuk 3:17–18).

‘We want to see God’s vision’

The church in Syria is building their future on the promises of Jesus. Even through unimaginable constraints, they are multiplying: turning their churches into Centers of Hope, offering food kits and vital relief to their communities, and, most importantly, sharing the love of Jesus where people are dying of isolation.

That’s why I believe the next great move of God is coming from this region. Historically, He works most powerfully among those who have the least. He doesn’t like to make a show of it; rather, God works quietly and steadily through the hearts of His people, who are faithfully spreading the message of Jesus, no matter the cost.

“We want to see God’s vision for the church in Syria,” Pastor Edward told me. “We want to learn to show the love of God to our enemies, and to all the people. We want to reach out to those who need help and support.

“Our hearts go with people who are in suffering. We know what pain means and what suffering means. So we unite in prayers for hurting people all over the world.”

Will you unite in prayer with me and Syrian believers? Let’s pray hopefully, like Habakkuk:

“Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.” (Habakkuk 3:2)

By David Curry, CEO of Open Doors USA
A lifetime income that allows you to give & receive

Your charitable gift annuity with Open Doors will help further our mission, for which you care so deeply. And you will receive the security of fixed annuity payments for your lifetime, backed by Open Doors’ assets and our obligation to pay.

Now is the right time to lock in your payout rate with a gift to fund a charitable gift annuity.

You’ll make a difference in the lives of persecuted believers all over the world.

To find out how high payments could be for you and to learn more about charitable gift annuities, please give us a call at 949-862-0321 or 800-559-5965, visit OpenDoorsUSA.org/PlannedGiving or email Karen Schneider, our Director of Planned Giving, at karens@odusa.org.
Text PRAYER to 32500
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