Rejected by family. Accepted by God.

How this skeptic son of a sheikh grew into a devoted follower of Jesus
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Cover Story
How this skeptic son of a sheikh grew into a devoted follower of Jesus.

The forgotten Christians in Iraq
For Christians like Sana, the wounds of ISIS are not even close to healed.

Features

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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

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Presence magazine showcases the powerful stories of faith of persecuted Christians, while showing how God is at work through the united Body of Christ around the world.

ON THE COVER
Anwar is a Christian in Syria. When he converted from his family’s faith and began to follow Jesus, he lost everything. But he found something new. Read his story on page 11.

ON THE BACK COVER
Back cover illustration created by Scott Erickson, Open Doors USA’s new Artist-in-Residence. Scott is a touring painter, performance artist and creative curate who mixes autobiography, aesthetics and comedic narrative to create experiences that speak to our deepest stories. Watch for Scott’s works of art—inspired by the persecuted church—in Presence magazine and on OpenDoorsUSA.org/ArtistInResidence.
Be the miracle they need

By David Curry

We all know what it’s like to need a miracle.

We’ve all been through seasons of need, loneliness, uncertainty. And we’ve all had problems that seemed like they could only be solved by divine intervention. Sometimes, the solution emerges with one grand gesture; sometimes, through a dozen small changes. Often, we keep right on going—working, waiting, hoping and praying another day for the miracle we need.

When I hear the stories told by believers in the Middle East, I feel the weight of the problems they carry. Many live in warzones, wondering if their neighborhood will be targeted next. Others worry about their next house church meeting, fearing it will be raided by secret police. And there are thousands like Anwar*, whom you’ll meet in this issue, rejected by their own families for choosing to follow Jesus.

As tragic as her statement is, it’s people like her and Anwar—the ones who remain, praying every day for something to change—who give me hope.

This remnant of the Church is choosing to sacrifice so much to be close to Jesus—and to represent His restorative presence in some of the world’s darkest places. They are the witnesses to the many more people who are giving their lives to Christ throughout the Middle East. And they are the outposts of faith, serving as the vessels for God’s miraculous work in this region.

In this issue, you’ll read their firsthand accounts of how God is working to weave hope through these witnesses’ tangled web of suffering. People like Anwar (page 11) and Sana (page 17). Though the causes of their crises are complex,

*Names changed to protect identity
God is still assigning a task to the ones who remain. God is giving them something they can do to help.

That inspires me because there’s something I can do, too. When Brother Andrew founded Open Doors, he said God spoke to him through Rev. 3:2:

“Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete…” REVELATION 3:2 (ESV).

That’s why Open Doors is a meeting point for Christians who share the assignment to “strengthen what remains.” It’s an assignment to run toward closing borders when everyone else is fleeing them. It’s about being people who are there for the long haul, for the ones left behind and for the ones who choose to stay.

I pray that you would make your calling your commitment—whether it’s to this work or another one—to this region or elsewhere. I pray that you and I can be faithful to those tasks, like our brothers and sisters in the persecuted church. I pray we can stand in as families for those without them, send the provisions that arrive just in time and be the hands and feet God uses to carry out His miraculous work in the Middle East.

God’s work preceded the crisis, and it will outlast the crisis. That’s why I believe the miracles we need are already in progress.

70% of Christians in Iraq & Syria have been forced to flee as refugees.

Open Doors USA President and CEO David Curry advocates on behalf of those who are persecuted for their Christian faith. He provides leadership to Open Doors in its mission to strengthen and equip Christians who live under extreme restrictions, while encouraging these believers to remain strong in their faith.
“You are dead to us.”

For so many of our brothers and sisters like Pradip in Nepal (pictured), words like these cut deep. So many times, they are the last words they hear from their father.

When Pradip’s Hindu parents learned about his and his sister’s faith, they cursed them and kicked them out of their home. Their village issued the same response, socially boycotting them—depriving them of access to food and the town’s water well.

That’s when our local partners stepped in to support them. Pradip is now working toward his degree in theology and plans to work with youth. He has great concern for young believers.

“When I decided to join Bible college, I didn’t have money,” he said. “I kept praying to God to fulfill my financial needs. Eventually, God blessed me through your organization, and now I am able to complete my degree.”

This is how God is using Christians like you to build His Kingdom.

Pray with Pradip and his sister, and for the many believers who have lost their parents and community.

“Imagine what it would be like to not be able to read your Bible.”

Until now, believers in rural areas of East Malaysia have had no personal access to Scripture. They are illiterate. Although they were born into Christian families, they don’t know the Bible because they can’t read it. Believers expressed their gratitude.

“I’m grateful and blessed to have this audio Bible.”

“I can listen to it anytime, even while farming. It really helps because I cannot read,” says Sawai, a recipient.

Through audio devices that contain the entire Bible in their local native languages plus sermons and worship songs, the Malaysian believer you see here is listening to God’s Word as she works. So far, we have distributed 1,700 devices.

Your support gives illiterate believers access to God’s Word.
**YOUNG WIDOW’S FAITH RESTORED IN KENYA**

Peninah (pictured above), a Christian widow from Kenya, is 26 years old, though she looks much younger. Two years ago, Peninah’s husband, Paul, was killed in an attack by the Islamic terrorist group al-Shabaab—the East African version of al-Qaeda or Boko Haram.

The radical extremists lined up everyone and demanded they recite a Muslim profession of faith. Paul, a strong Christian, refused. “Then, they shot him,” Peninah shares. The tragic loss tested her faith. “I asked God if this was His plan or the devil’s. I lived a life full of questions. I almost lost my faith,” she says. But through God’s plan, a friend connected Peninah to Open Doors. We were able to offer her trauma counseling.

“The training helped me heal my wounds, to share my suffering and accept the Lord to lead my life,” she says. Open Doors is also helping Peninah learn a trade and is supporting dressmaking classes. We’ve also provided her with a sewing machine to start her own business. The young widow and mom is thankful.

---

**BELIEVERS IN CENTRAL ASIA SECRETLY BAPTIZED**

Our field shared powerful photos of a secret baptism in Central Asia, where new believers were baptized in an undisclosed place.

If caught, they risk persecution and being exiled from their country. Please pray with us today for these new family members as they risk so much to follow Jesus.

“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

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**TEAMS WALK WITH INDONESIAN BELIEVERS AFTER BRUTAL ATTACK**

Our family in Indonesia is still reeling from the May terrorist attack in Indonesia’s Central Sulawesi province, where four Christians were brutally massacred by the Islamic group MIT (Eastern Indonesia Mujahideen).

Since learning of the attack, our partners have visited and walked with Kalimago village where they prayed with believers like Parman*, who witnessed the violence and ran for his life.

“That day, as I was running, I prayed to God, ‘God please help me. Deliver me.’ Praise God, today I can still see my family in Kalimago.”

Seeing how fearful and traumatized Parman was when he met him, Brother Ari held and prayed with him—and ministered to many of the Christians who are struggling through their grief.

Iswadi, pastor of Toraja Mamasa Church where two of the victims attended, expressed his appreciation: “Thank you so much for your participation and support for us. In this situation, we are not fighting alone, we got help from you. We do experience the presence of Open Doors in this place, side by side with us, to feel the burden we feel.”

Remember Parman, Pastor Iswadi and the rest of our traumatized family in Kalimago village. Ask God to remind them they’re not alone.

Your support allows us to care for traumatized believers.
REFUGEE CENTER IN TURKEY UNITES IRANIAN CHRISTIANS

Kouroush*, a former house church leader in Iran and now a refugee in Turkey, remembers what it was like to leave his home and country and go to a new, foreign land alone. He made that difficult decision after being tracked down by Iran’s secret police and tortured in prison for his faith.

In Turkey, Kouroush’s life has been difficult. He has no rights or access to services because he’s not a citizen. For the first few years, he often felt hopeless, he says. He longed for a safe place where he could meet and talk with other Iranian refugees like him. A place where he could grow in his faith.

But a place like that didn’t exist in Turkey. Until now!

Through your prayers and gifts, Open Doors has worked with indigenous partners to support the building of this community center. Kouroush is thankful for what you’ve done.

“Without the international family of God, we wouldn’t have been able to establish this center. I feel like God’s hand was in this. He brought us all together.”

When we visited Kouroush, he was counting the days to the opening of the center.

“I am really looking forward to what God is going to do here, to see the fruits of this center. All to glorify the name of our triune God!”

Pray with Kouroush as he leads this Center of Hope and for the many Iranian refugees who will find community and hope as they navigate uncertain futures.

*Names changed to protect identity

Your support provides safe places for persecuted believers

PERSECUTION WATCH

What’s happening with God’s people in places where following Jesus can cost the most
FRONTLINE FAITH

Christians strive to disciple youth in the face of a military coup

A pastor from a remote area in Myanmar briefly shared with us what has been happening in the recent months after the military coup. In February, Myanmar’s military declared a coup and took over the presiding government.

“There has been unimaginable bloodshed. Believers are suffering. There is loss of employment, and food is becoming scarce. In this situation, it is not enough to only share God’s Word. People need physical nourishment as well.

“We see young people coming to Christ, hungry for food and hungry to read the Bible and to learn. Now is an important time to disciple them because Christian youth are tempted to join the [People's Defense forces].”

MYANMAR

“There has been unimaginable bloodshed. Believers are suffering.”

BANGLADESH

Christians confined to mosque, forced to renounce Christ

“Why have you converted as a Christian? You will be destroyed!”

They were the words Muslim extremists yelled as they raided the homes of 10 Christian families in northern Bangladesh where Christian persecution is intensifying and Muslim religious leaders are closely monitoring local churches.

In the capital city of Dhaka, the families were seen worshiping and reading their Bibles during a local church program. That’s when the leaders began plotting their actions. The next day after the raids, the same leaders invited the families to a mosque for a peaceful conversation. But when they arrived, the families were confined and forced to renounce their faith in Christ.

Reportedly, the families were forced to circle the mosque three times and were released with the condition that they were expected to regularly attend the mosque.

Bangladeshi Christians in this region are fearful of what will happen next. Many have gone into hiding and Christians are also refused work.

A local pastor cried with our partners and shared his frustration: “The Muslims intentionally built a mosque near the church so that they can hinder Christians from coming to church. They want to destroy our church.”

Pray with Bangladeshi believers who each day face suffering for their decision to leave Islam and follow Jesus. Pray for their protection and that these local churches would grow through persecution.

Pray with Bangladeshi believers who each day face suffering for their decision to leave Islam and follow Jesus. Pray for their protection and that these local churches would grow through persecution.
Christians targeted by the Allied Democratic Forces because of faith

The situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) continues to deteriorate. Recently, 22 people were killed in the volatile region of North Kivu province. The attackers are suspected to be members of the Islamic extremist group Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). ADF has targeted Christians during the last several years of unrest in the DRC.

The ADF has controlled significant territory in the DRC, first in the North Kivu province but now also in the Ituri province. For many years, Open Doors sources have warned that the ADF is working to uproot the local, mostly Christian population to expand their foothold.

In their annual report, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) said the DRC has the world’s most neglected number of displaced people. “DRC is one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21st century,” said NRC Secretary-General Jan Egeland. “A lethal combination of spiraling violence, record hunger levels and total neglect has ignited a mega-crisis that warrants a mega-response. But instead, millions of families on the brink of the abyss seem to be forgotten by the outside world and are left shut off from any support line.”

Please pray for Christians in the affected regions of the DRC. Pray they would be kept safe, comforted after attacks and given the courage to stand for Jesus even in the midst of attacks and pressure.

Baptist church in a Manini village attacked by militants

Recently, suspected Fulani militants attacked a Baptist church in Manini village during a morning worship service, killing one person and injuring another. Reportedly, four women were abducted—including a widow whose husband was killed in an earlier attack. Please pray with our family. Every day, they’re at risk of attack because of their decision to follow Jesus and because of where they live. Ask God to strengthen their faith through this persecution.

Lord, we pray for these grieving families and these four women. May not a hair on their head be harmed in captivity. Bring them back home safe. And we pray for the families of these women and the heartache they’re feeling right now. God we pray for Your peace that passes all understanding. Amen.

Pastor arrests send warnings to churches

“Be cautious about going out alone. If you have to do so, please report to each other and ask other brothers and sisters to pay close attention to you, making sure you stay in touch.”

This is the warning Senior Pastor Ezra Jin sent to his ministers of Beijing Zion Church in China—two days after two of the church’s pastors were arrested.

The arrests are believed to be a warning to Jin who has remained very active in ministry despite the closing of his church in September 2018. The church was banned after leaders refused requests to install 24 surveillance cameras in their sanctuary. Jin and the church have continued to minister to the surrounding community.

After the arrests, Pastor Ezra Jin released urgent letters to his congregation: “As we know, [church pastors] Chunzi and Jiafu are two examples facing the current storm, and there are many other members who are experiencing it together. We are grateful to be able to stand with [them] and face the difficulties together.”

Pray with Pastor Jin who asked his congregation to pray:

“Pray for Minister Chunzi Huang, that the Lord gives her all the strength she needs. May the Lord make a way for us, that we may hear information about her current situation as soon as possible. Pray the Lord gives Brother Qie heavenly strength to be His witness in suffering. May the Lord strengthen him as He strengthened apostles of early churches.”
Rejected by family. Accepted by God.

When Anwar’s family threw him out for his faith in Jesus, he had nowhere to turn. But God had other plans.

By Christopher Summers
In Syria, it’s fair to say your family might be one of the most important things in your life.

Your family is a multi-generational force, tying you to your culture, your community and your religion. Syrian children are expected to obey their parents, and the tradition of honor drives familial status. Communities comprise tight-knit families who intermarry and keep traditions and ancient customs intact.

But if you leave your family in Syria? You’re nothing.

So, when Anwar* gave up his family because of his faith in Jesus, it meant more than a temporary loss of some loved ones. It meant he lost his identity, his history and the people and community that loved and raised him.

Because of Jesus, he lost everything and became a man without a history and without a people. But now?

“I have hope in Jesus,” he says. It’s a simple sentiment, but it’s not an easy one. Anwar has been through the painful depths of persecution, and it’s only the promises of Jesus — and the promises of a new family through Him—that have carried Anwar through.

THE SON OF A SHEIKH

Anwar grew up in the suburbs of a place in Syria we can’t name, because he’s still well-known there. The place where he lived was a simple community of around 700 people, mostly made up of Alawites. (The Alawites are a branch of Islam—though some Muslims completely reject the idea that Alawites are Muslim.) Each Alawite community has a leader called a sheikh—a very strict follower of Alawite traditions who has duties in officiating prayers, funerals, marriages and religious judgment.

Anwar is the son of his community’s sheikh. The weight of remembering his past shows as soon as he begins talking. It’s not a life filled with easy memories; each painful recollection is a reminder of what he has lost.

Anwar grew up with his parents along with two sisters and a brother, and because of his father’s status, he was well-known in the community.

“My childhood memories are very annoying to me,” he says. “I was excluded and didn’t have many friends, I would spend hours on my phone, but I was also very religious. I would pray with my dad and imitate his moves.”

He stares at the ground as he continues. It’s clear the memories remain heavy for him. “When I turned 15, I started asking my dad serious questions about the Alawite religion,” he remembers. “I was very curious about who Allah really was. Does he love me? And what should I do to please him? Unfortunately, my father wouldn’t answer me. He would tell me, ‘You’ll know more when you grow up.’” Anwar was always told he needed to wait: wait for a certain age, wait until he memorized a certain prayer, wait until he followed a certain rule. That is, until waiting was no longer an answer for him.

The Alawite faith is very secretive. Anwar explains it is not allowed for women to learn the secrets of the faith; it’s only the men when they reach a certain age who go through a series of trainings. So, to answer his own questions, Anwar started watching documentaries about religions. One of the shows he watched was about Christianity. “I was sure that Christianity is a lie, and I was convinced that it is a wrong faith because to [Alawites], Christians are deluded,” he says. “They worship a human, not a God; they are infidels.”

Anwar was taught by his parents and community that he shouldn’t even be friends with a Christian.

“I wasn’t supposed to let any Christian enter my life,” he says. “[Christians] were said to have a way of convincing people to join their false religion; but as I grew up and went to college, I met a Christian girl.”

Anwar mocked this girl and made fun of her when she told him about the gospel—how Jesus died and rose from the dead to save humanity. “I didn’t believe a word she said, especially when she told me that He is alive now and I can ask Him myself,” he says. When Anwar was in college, the Syrian Civil War was raging around him. While his parents
managed to postpone forced military service for his brother, Anwar was only able to avoid his military service because he was a student. But at that point, he was failing his classes and risked being expelled from college. His health, both physically and mentally, was deteriorating.

“I went through deep depression, and through it all, the Christian girl kept talking to me about Jesus, which made the pressure even greater,” he says.

“At that point, I believed that Allah hated me, and I hated him for allowing all this to happen to me. I wanted to end my life.”

Anwar thought he had no future and no hope—but God had another idea. Anwar recalls: “My friend said: ‘Why not try to talk to Jesus and see what He has to tell you? If you want to end your life, then you have nothing to lose.’ So I thought to myself, if it doesn’t work, then I can still kill myself, so why not try this? She taught me how to pray, and I went into my room and I remember thinking that I was a crazy person for talking to myself. At first, nothing changed, but after a while I became addicted to knowing Jesus. I started watching videos, listening to worship songs and sermons. I completely forgot about suicide. One day, I was talking to Him, and I started crying. I poured my heart out to Him, and suddenly I wasn’t alone anymore. I have a friend: Jesus.”

Anwar started reading the Gospel of John. He remembers how he felt God talking to him through the Bible, spiritual songs and sermons. “I fell in love with Jesus,” he says. “He is my best friend. I don’t talk to my family—I just talk to Him about everything.”

*Names changed to protect identity
“I fell in love with Jesus. He is my best friend.”

— Anwar*
“DON’T EVER COME BACK HERE”

Anwar’s newfound faith gave him such joy … but it was coupled with the fear of his family finding out the truth about his conversion. “I had to leave the house because if they found out the truth, I would be in danger,” he says. “I could have been killed, kicked out of the house, deprived of my inheritance and disowned.”

Anwar couldn’t utter the word “Jesus” in front of his family—and the pressure he felt was unrelenting, especially since he used to hear stories about people who converted and were slaughtered, attacked or imprisoned. “I remember when my friend took me to church for the first time in the city,” he recalls.

“I didn’t hear the sermon or the songs—I was preoccupied by the fear of someone recognizing me and telling my family.”

But word soon got out. People discovered Anwar—the son of a sheikh—was attending a church, and the news spread like wildfire. Eventually, the truth reached his parents. As he remembers this moment, Anwar sighs and pauses for few seconds. Then he continues.

“I heard that my mother had a nervous breakdown, and I called my siblings, but they didn’t pick up,” he says. “I called everyone, and no one answered.

“After a few hours, my sister called and she was crying. She said: ‘Don’t ever come back here; my mother is in the hospital because of you. You are no longer my brother. Wasn’t your faith enough for you? You have no honor.’ And [then] she hung up on me.”

Around the same time, Anwar was invited by his Christian friend to a conference with the church. He had a choice to make: Should he return home and confront the situation with his family … or ignore the problems at home and prioritize the conference to grow in his new faith?

Eventually, he decided to go to the conference. “I’m remembering very hurtful details. How could my family do this to me?” Anwar says, wiping silent tears with shaky hands. “I turned off my phone and went to the conference, and it was the best couple of days of my life. I experienced the Lord in an unprecedented way. I listened to Him and felt His presence and forgot everything. I was cheerful when I came back.”

But when he returned to the house where he was staying—which was owned by his parents—his room had been cleaned out and his bags packed.

His brother called him and asked him to leave the house immediately. Anwar had no place to go.

NEW HOPE AND NEW LIFE

Anwar contacted his friend who called the church, one of the local churches Open Doors partners with in Syria. Through this church, Open Doors helped Anwar rent the room where he currently lives. For the first time, he is alone with no family to lean on. He knew it was time to trust the Lord and put into practice what he had learned in his new faith. “I had a small amount of money from my parents, which I [hadn’t spent]. It got me by for a while,” he remembers. But Anwar needed to find a job.

Anwar’s friend works at the Center of Hope, one of the church-based community centers supported by Open Doors that helps believers live out the hope of the gospel in Syria and Iraq. His friend shared Anwar’s story with the management and, with the literacy skills he got a job at the Center of Hope. Now, he teaches English to fifth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students. “[The Center of Hope] helped me in my hardest conditions,” he says.

“This was a new hope for me, a new start and new opportunity for the future.”

Anwar’s favorite part of his job is the opportunity to talk to children about Jesus. They pray together at the beginning of every day. “Children don’t just need a teacher; they need someone who has a relationship with God and can influence them positively,” he says.

He is very grateful. “The Center of Hope gave me a new beginning in my life,” he says. “After my old family became like strangers to me, I had nothing to belong to. I was alone. Now, I’ve met a new family in the church; they compensated me for the things I’ve lost. We laugh together, we share our thoughts and time with each other. If it wasn’t for the Center, I don’t know what I would do. I think I would be homeless, hungry and alone.”

It’s obvious how Anwar’s feelings change as he speaks of his new life. He breathes easier, his eyes shine and he is more relaxed. “Jesus is everything to me,” he says. “When I had no one, He was with me: my Brother, my Companion, my Best friend. I talk to Him all the time, I rely on Him. Jesus truly saved my life. When I wanted to kill myself, He pulled me back and gave me hope for the future.

“When things go wrong, I escape to Jesus. I know He has a good plan for my life. He gave me a new family, and we pray for each other and I feel safe here.”

*Names changed to protect identity*
“This was a new hope for me, a new start and new opportunity for the future.”

“If I could go back in time, I would have converted even sooner. I don’t want to live a second without Jesus, and I say to all the people who are going through the same circumstances: Have courage and trust the Lord—because it’s worth it; it’s really worth everything.”

So much has happened in Anwar’s life. His journey from the skeptical son of a sheikh to a hopeful follower of Jesus is nothing short of inspiring.

“I still pray for a miracle for my family,”

Anwar adds, “to reconnect intimately with my family like before, but where I am now reconciles me to my loss.” He continues to pray for his family and friends, that they will experience the freedom and purpose he found in following Jesus, and that they will know Christ as the one who died to carry the punishment of our sins and their sins.

When you support Open Doors, you become part of the incredible transformation in people’s lives. Anwar has gone from being hated by man to being loved by His heavenly Father; from being neglected to being embraced; from existing in the dark to living in the brightest light. And he’s gone from being a man without a home and family to being a part of Christ’s body, with family all over the world.

Centers of Hope look different in different places, depending on the needs of Christians in the surrounding communities. The Center of Hope of the church where Anwar works is an institute that provides private classes for first- through ninth-grade students. It aims to support families educationally by teaching children and making sure they study well without additional financial burdens on the families. It also works with the kids spiritually by organizing activities that teach children how to have a relationship with God and know more about Jesus.
The Forgotten Christians in Iraq

For Christians like Sana, the wounds of ISIS are not even close to healed

By Christopher Summers
He held the barrel of his gun against her head.

That was his answer to Sana’s plea.

The ISIS fighter kept the gun to Sana’s head as she begged him to allow her husband and two sons to drive on the bus to safety with her. His weapon was his answer. The bus doors closed, and Sana was off. She’d escaped the horrors of ISIS.

But she has never seen her husband and her sons since.

Like many stories about the atrocities of ISIS, Sana’s account remained buried for years. The kidnappings of Christians by ISIS have been kept silent, out of shame and fear. Now, one by one, the stories come to the surface. The reality of the pain and trauma left behind are coming into focus and now, more than ever, Iraq’s Christians need hope.

We meet Sana in her house in Erbil, a city in northern Iraq. She looks tired—tired of waiting for news of her family, tired of the continuous memories of the atrocities she saw. Her emotions are flat. The only moment a little spark appears in her eyes is when she talks about her children: her 25-year-old daughter Tania and her missing sons Tony (born in 1994), “quiet and protective” and Issa (born in 2001), “my little angel.”

Sana has kept her story to herself because she feared repercussions for her husband and sons. But recently her daughter has been encouraging her to share the story. “She told me, ‘there is nothing wrong with that—speak up!’” Sana says. “So, I will talk. Maybe someone knows where my missing husband and sons are. I have hope.”

Sana shows us a photograph that was taken shortly before ISIS entered Qaraqosh, the city where she lived. The picture shows Sana, her husband Sabah and their three children posing in front of their church. Sana softly touches the face of Issa in the middle. It is the last family picture Sana has.

THE CHOICE TO STAY

In the summer of 2014, ISIS had failed to take over Qaraqosh, though they came close. When the extremists attacked again in August of that year, Sabah was convinced ISIS would fail again. So, while most families fled—including Tania, who left with extended family—Sana, her husband and two sons stayed in Qaraqosh.

Then August 7 happened. “We were all sleeping when I heard sounds: the sounds of people shouting,” Sana remembers. “Because Sabah was sick, I woke up my oldest son Tony and we listened together. ‘Qaraqosh is ours now,’ they shouted on the streets.” ISIS had not failed this time. They had taken Qaraqosh, and Sana and her family were trapped.

Anxious days followed. The family stayed inside their house, huddled together in one room. They kept the lights off and used a lighter to find their way. At night they heard ISIS fighters roaming the streets, breaking down doors. “We prayed a lot together and promised each other to stay together,” Sana remembers. “That was our comfort, that we had each other.”

One moment is very sharp for Sana’s. It gives her hope for her son Issa. “One night, Issa was sleeping on my lap when he suddenly opened his eyes,” she says. “I asked him what happened. He told me that he had a dream in which he saw Jesus descending in shining clothes. He looked at Issa and smiled.”

Finally, more than two weeks after ISIS took the city, the day Sana had been dreading came. Four men in civilian clothes broke down their door, finding the family with hands lifted in fear and surrender. Sana remembers how little Issa was trembling.

But the men spoke in a friendly manner “They told Issa: ‘Don’t be scared, you are safe. We just want to know if you have weapons,’” she says. “They searched our house for weapons and left again. In the following two days an imam [Islamic leader] came to bring us food.”
Healing from persecution takes time. That’s why we need your continued help to bring Centers of Hope to Iraq. We know that, through them, God can heal even the deepest wounds. Let your brothers and sisters know that they are not forgotten.
FEATURES

WHERE ARE YOU GOING, MOM?

After several days, the family was summoned to the hospital. “You are to be put on a bus to Ankawa—the Christian neighborhood of Erbil,” the men in civilian clothes told them.

“Again, they told us not to worry,” Sana says. But what Sana saw when they arrived at the hospital did worry her. “The men of ISIS I saw there did not wear civilian clothes. They were dressed in black and carried weapons. They were scary, shouted and they weren’t friendly to us at all anymore.”

The hospital was crowded. Buses came and went. Sana estimates there were around 30 people waiting outside the hospital when she arrived. “They collected our ID cards,” she says. “Tony was very nervous and worried about me. But when he asked the ISIS fighters what they would do to me, they pointed a gun at him to shut him up.”

ISIS took the valuables of everyone waiting and split up the men and women. “That was a difficult moment for us,” Sana shares. “My boys were scared. We’d never been separated from each other. They told us that we would all see each other again in Ankawa, that we shouldn’t worry about it. Issa was so scared. The last thing he said to me was: ‘Where are you going, Mom?’”

It broke Sana’s heart when she was put in a bus without her boys and husband. “I asked one of the ISIS fighters, ‘Please, tell me: where are you taking my husband?’ But he put his gun to my head and he said, ‘Either you shut up, or I’ll shoot you in the head.’”

Sana hasn’t seen her sons and her husband since.

With a tissue, Sana dabs her eyes. Real tears don’t come so often anymore. She had shed them all. The hours she spent crying in prayer are countless. Family members have pushed her away—their heads are full of the trauma of their own displacement. She has kept her story secret and was reluctant to reach out to the church. She and her daughter are on their own.

Sana and her daughter miss their family every day: “We were so close,” Sana says. But the challenge goes further than just the emotional aspect; in a Middle Eastern country like Iraq, it’s not typical for women to live alone.

Daily life is more difficult—official papers are usually arranged by the men in the house, and some places aren’t safe to go to as a woman by herself.

CENTERS OF HOPE

Stories like Sana’s are just the tip of the iceberg of the general trauma inflicted on Christians in Iraq. “We have rebuilt a lot of our houses and churches,” says Father Ammar, a church leader in Erbil. “But ISIS destroyed much more than just that: They destroyed human beings.”

There is no significant mental health care system in Iraq to address the issues the Christian community is faced with today. That is why, with your support, we support churches like Father Ammar’s so they can become Centers of Hope. These centers offer practical and spiritual support—but they also provide emotional support. “People like Sana need the full support of the church,” Father Ammar says. “They need someone to be close to them, listen to their needs. Someone to help them to find hope for the future.”

Whether or not Sana will accept this help is uncertain. Though accepting help for your mental wellbeing is slowly gaining acceptance among Christians in Iraq, the stigma hasn’t disappeared. All we can do is offer the help—and pray for her.

“People like Sana need the full support of the church. They need someone to be close to them, listen to their needs. Someone to help them to find hope for the future.”

CLINGING TO GOD

After the liberation of Qaraqosh in 2016, Sana had hope her family might be reunited. But she didn’t hear from them—perhaps because they don’t have the means, or perhaps because they are no longer alive.

Sana doesn’t dare to speak about this last option out loud.

God is the only One she clings to still to find her husband and sons. “My faith in the almighty God is so big,” she says. “And I keep praying that they will come back. They are all I have. God willing, they will come back.”

“People like Sana need the full support of the church. They need someone to be close to them, listen to their needs. Someone to help them to find hope for the future.”
Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I have been married to my best friend, Barbara, for 29 years and have two adult children. I am a local historian in my area of New York state and am currently writing a book about the sites in and around Cooperstown relating to the life and works of author James Fenimore Cooper.

How do you serve the persecuted church through Open Doors?

As a Connector, I speak at my home church at least twice a month, sharing prayer requests, giving updates and introducing initiatives to help specific Christians who are targeted for their faith in Christ. I also travel to other churches in New York and give messages and reports on the persecuted church.

When did you first become aware of persecuted Christians?

 Shortly after I was saved in 1994, I began receiving The Voice of the Martyrs newsletter, and to be honest, the topic was something I wanted to ignore and threw the magazines away without reading them. It wasn’t until a few years later, when the Lord began burdening my heart for Christians in North Korea, that I became heavily involved in bringing awareness about my persecuted brothers and sisters around the world.

What’s one piece of encouragement you’d offer to others about helping the persecuted church?

Through the Lord’s leading, find out what country or area of the world the Lord wants you to get involved with. Give, pray or minister in whatever ways He enables you to.

What’s a place you have a heart for?

The Lord has burdened my heart for the countries of North Korea, Iran and India. In early 2018, I was blessed to have been able to organize and host two North Korean female defectors at my church.

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Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Linda and I met in college and have been married over 50 years. We have nine grown children and have three more grandchildren expected this year to bring the total to 19. We are retired in northern Idaho, near where my wife was raised.

How do you serve the persecuted church through Open Doors?

Since we read [God's Smuggler], we have supported Open Doors with our monthly tithe. We then invested in a small annuity and have been donating the returns of that to Open Doors. We have been supporting Open Doors financially for over 40 years.

When did you first become aware of persecuted Christians?

In raising our children, we would read nightly to them, and one of the books we read was about Brother Andrew where we became aware of the persecution of Christians behind the “Iron Curtain.” We also have friends from college who traveled to Eastern Europe to distribute Bibles and shared with us their experiences, challenges and blessings.

What’s one piece of encouragement you’d offer to others about helping the persecuted church?

The Lord has blessed us throughout the years, and we rejoice in the leading and opportunities He has provided. We may not have been able to send as much as we wished, but it came from the heart. He always provided in times of need and filled us with joy in sharing with Christian brothers and sisters.

What’s a place you have a heart for?

We have friends who have just returned from a Muslim country after serving the Lord there. We continue to be aware of Christian persecution all around the world.

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Scott Payne
CONNECTOR, Deposit, N.Y.

Paul Mahlow
CONNECTOR, Idaho

INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

CONTACT CONNECT@ODUSA.ORG FOR MORE INFORMATION.
What’s ONE piece of advice you’d give to your child?

Julia Warren
OPEN DOORS USA

“Everyone you meet has been created by God, and everyone has a story—but few people listen. Be the one who listens.”

Timothy Cho*
NORTH KOREA (now living in the United Kingdom)

“As my daughter grows, I will tell her that God has called us not to be successful but to be faithful—because faith is confidence in what we hope for, and it is in Him that your strength lies!”

Mourad
EGYPT

“I would tell my son Proverbs 3:1–2: ‘My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity.’ The Word of God and His commandments will protect my son if he follows it.”

Kris Jenson
OPEN DOORS USA

“I would give my kids the verse Matthew 6:33: ‘But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’ Putting God first in our life is the key to receiving all the lavish blessings the Father longs to give us. Our Father is a generous and giving God.”

Samer
SYRIA

“I advise my daughter to live by the Bible and rely on God only. Obey His word because it’s the key to all blessings. Also, to pay attention to spiritual things more than the worldly things and financial struggles because God always provides.”

Lina
MIDDLE EAST

“I tell my daughter that Jesus is the source of living waters, He is the light of the world, He is the Alpha and the Omega. In Him all were made. In Him we live, exist and move.”

*Names changed to protect identity
Yet over the course of the past seven years, Open Doors USA's Hope for the Middle East campaign has had several notable breakthroughs on the advocacy front.

In 2017, Open Doors USA brought Noeh, a young Christian boy from Iraq, to meet with the office of the United Nations secretary-general and then-Vice President Mike Pence. Noeh presented a petition with over 800,000 signatures from 147 countries to both the Vice President and the Secretary General's office, calling for funding to rebuild Christian communities destroyed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

In the years that followed, USAID, the federal agency responsible for granting foreign aid, quickly expanded its programs for reaching religious communities in the Middle East. This led to unprecedented, direct U.S. assistance for Christians in both Iraq and Syria.

In 2018, thanks to the prayers of Open Doors USA supporters and millions of others, around the world, as well as extensive advocacy work, Pastor Andrew Brunson was set free from a Turkish prison. He spent nearly two years imprisoned for his faith and his story became the focus of major international attention.

In 2019, Open Doors USA provided critical information to Vice President Pence, members of the Senate, and others on the threat to Syrian Christians posed by the incursion of Turkish troops into Northeast Syria. The information we provided was used by high-level officials, including the vice president in direct talks with Turkish President Erdogan that led to a cease-fire and relief for Syrian Christians.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, we continued to meet with officials in Washington D.C., providing briefings on the state of Christians in the Middle East. Our work helped to inform U.S. engagement in the region, engagement that has provided important incentives for reform in countries like Egypt and Sudan.

In Egypt, positive changes include the government allowing for greater registration of churches and some increased openness by officials to change laws that negatively impact Christian communities. In Sudan, a new government has finally discarded the country’s blasphemy law, a tool long used to persecute religious minorities. These changes were met by an improvement for both countries in their relationship with the United States, which means increased trade and cooperation on international issues.

All of these victories may seem small when compared to the considerable challenges that remain for Christians in the Middle East, but they demonstrate an invaluable point: God provides hope no matter how difficult the circumstances. After so many years of Open Doors’ work in the Middle East, our responsibility is to look back at what God has accomplished, hold on to the hope He has provided, and look forward to the hope that is still to come.
READ

Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts.

Jeremiah 15:16 (ESV)
CONNECTIONS
26  Presence
| Sept / Oct 2021

Give a gift that keeps on giving!
For more information, please contact Karen Schneider at 800-659-5965, visit OpenDoorsUSA.org/PlannedGiving or email her at karens@odusa.org

Many Christians desire to leave a legacy that will help their favorite charities, like Open Doors—and leave a Christian testimony when they pass on.

Here’s how
Simply name Open Doors as a beneficiary of your assets or estate.
You’ll have the joy of leaving a gift for persecuted Christians, and you’ll also save on estate and income taxes. It’s a wonderful way to support your persecuted sisters and brothers, and to secure your financial future.

REFLECT
It’s 6 a.m. when Bible distributor Ramy* loads his van with Bibles.

“Let’s pray before we go,” he says while, folding his hands. Then he sets off, loaded with copies of God’s Word and Christian literature to give to Christians in Iraq.

During the pandemic, Ramy’s work was more difficult—regional borders closed, and special permission was required to move around within Iraq. But Ramy noticed a silver lining to the horror of COVID-19: people started studying the Bible at home more.

One of these people is 75-year-old Jalila. Her eyes don’t work as well as they used to, but this doesn’t stop her from reading the Bible. She just uses a magnifying glass to read the small letters.

“The Bible is the food of the soul,” she says.
“It is the most important thing in my life.”

She gets Bible study books through the delivery, but she has no need for a new Bible: The Bible she is holding was one of the few things she took from her house after ISIS approached her town in 2014 and she had to flee.

“I stood in front of the bookshelves, not knowing if I would ever return,” she remembers. “I took my Bible with me and asked the Lord to protect the rest of my home as we left.”

Jalila never regretted taking her Bible—God’s Word guided her through her time in a refugee camp. She wasn’t just reading the Bible by herself; she gathered others to study a verse from the Word together each day. Because of your support, our local partners were able to provide Bibles for those in Jalila’s group.

After Jalila’s hometown was liberated from the Islamic State group, she returned home. She now reads the Bible daily with her grandchildren. With your support, her grandchildren have received a children’s Bible and other books that help them understand their faith. Aram takes after his grandma in sharing the gospel.

“I share the stories I read with my friends in school,” he says.

PRAY
Lord, we thank you for the gift of your Word. We are so grateful for the power of Scripture that speaks into every culture, into every time and into the heart of every person who will listen. Thank you for Christians like Jalila and other believers in Iraq like her. Thank you for giving her strength and faith to endure, even in the face of horrific persecution. We pray for kids like Aram, the future of the church in Iraq. We pray you will be with them and guide their steps. We pray all these things in Jesus’ name, Amen.
Give a gift that keeps on giving!

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