YOU CAN BE THERE.

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

Becoming an Open Doors Frontline Partner means you'll join the largest on-the-ground network of support for persecuted Christians in the world.

SIGN UP TODAY AT OPENDOORSUSA.ORG/PRESENCEFLP
A Missing Seat at the Table
When Sele’s father was killed for his faith, it could have meant the end of his family. But God had other plans.

A Bittersweet Christmas
Rafif is a Christian girl in Iraq who always misses her dad around Christmas. But your prayers and support are helping her—and other kids—stand strong.

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
Sele is a Christian living in Nigeria whose father was murdered for his faith. But Sele still sees God at work. Turn to page 14 to read more.

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.

©Open Doors 2021
OpenDoorsUSA.org
888-5-BIBLE-5 (888-524-2535)
info@odusa.org
PO Box 27001 Santa Ana, CA 92799
Nov/Dec 2021 | Vol. 2, No. 6
REPEATING

THE

NEE
Reading the story of Jesus’ birth together is a common Christmas tradition, especially for young families. Every year, it becomes a little harder to prevent the tradition from becoming routine. But we keep on reading and reflecting on the idea of “Emmanuel, God with us”—because, as every parent knows, we repeat what we want our kids to hear.

But what can parents do when their kids are hearing more hardship than hope? How can the parents of the persecuted church cultivate faith for their children in places where following Jesus invites suffering?

In these pages, you will read stories of kids who are receiving a legacy of faith that’s intertwined with pain, difficulty and loss. It’s an inheritance that stands in stark contrast to the peace and connectedness of many of our own faith stories—the joyful kinds of stories told around a Christmas tree.

But you will also read about the seeds of resilience that are growing roots in the next generation of Jesus-followers. And I hope you will catch a glimpse of the unreservedly bold Church they are becoming.

If persecution continues to rise at its current rate, our children will suffer more for their faith than any generation before them. More kids will be forced from their homes in a hurry, narrowly escaping before their parents are arrested on false charges. Others will lose fathers in violent attacks by extremists. And more still will lose the opportunity to go to school when Christians are excluded from public education.

But these traumatic experiences don’t have to harden their hearts. We can help them learn to navigate suffering by repeating the hope they need to hear—much like Jesus repeats, “Be not afraid,” to us in Scripture.

Our vision is to build the next generation into a resilient Church. Together, we can provide spiritual support and mental health counseling to every suffering child. We can give them an education and teach them vocational skills that can help them survive. We can equip their families to faithfully demonstrate the presence of Jesus through hard things. And most importantly, we can remind these kids that they don’t have to be afraid.

I often wish I could spare the children of the persecuted church even a fraction of their pain. But I also know that through their pain, they become prepared. And that’s why I’m excited for the future of the Church worldwide: because there’s a new generation rising up who are prepared with resilient faith. The children of the persecuted church are strong enough to keep hopeful hearts while carrying heavy loads.

Their generation may be the one to usher in a new era of freedom for followers of Jesus. And you are helping their cause through your prayers, your encouragement and your support toward their care and education. Through you, they are reminded that they are not alone: God With Us. That’s something to celebrate.
Uganda

AN AFTER-SCHOOL VENTURE IN UGANDA

Meet Anna. She is an 11-year-old fifth grader in Uganda—and a survivor of Christian persecution.

Each time Anna’s mother refused to renounce the Jesus she had found, her Muslim husband beat her repeatedly. Eventually, he kicked both her and Anna out of their home. Thankfully, Anna’s Bible study community took them in and gave them food.

Our teams met Anna when she tagged along with her mom to an Open Doors seminar that teaches business skills to persecuted believers from a biblical worldview. As the young girl listened, she quickly grasped principles that eventually led her mom to invest in her daughter. Anna’s mother bought her daughter a tray of eggs, and Anna began to sell them after school and on weekends.

Today, Anna is well-known for selling eggs. The money she earns helps pay for school supplies.

Anna shares: “I thank God for Open Doors and the trainings because it has strengthened my faith, and I now have the courage to run a small business.”

India

INDONESIAN BELIEVERS SAY “THANK YOU” FOR LIFESAVING COVID RELIEF

Facing an unexpected surge in COVID-19 cases due to the Delta variant, Indonesia called for another strict lockdown, forcing the shutdown of many businesses financially unable to keep their doors open.

Responding to the growing need for food and supplies, Open Doors’ local partners distributed groceries to starving Christians in Central Java—an area with strong Hindu and Buddhist influences impacted by the surge.

Our brothers and sisters are grateful for your support:

“I don’t know if I can survive without this help. Life is very difficult these days. I feel very blessed. May God repay Open Doors’ kindness.”

— Yah

“[you] had not come, I could have been a street child because we would not have been able to afford food or school fees.”

— 11-year-old Anna in Uganda
Burkina Faso

DISPLACED CHILDREN RECEIVE EDUCATION IN BURKINA FASO

After continuous extremist attacks in Burkina Faso, hundreds of thousands of people have now fled their homes.

In the first quarter of 2021, more than 200,000 people in the northern and eastern regions were displaced by attacks in Burkina Faso. A total of more than 1.3 million people have now been internally displaced—60 percent of them children.

With your help, Open Doors provided a group of children with food and education. Thirteen out of these kids finished primary school; their next step is secondary school. Unfortunately, about half in this group did not pass—an indication of how difficult it is to carry on with life amidst the extremist violence and disruption that has plagued the country and the entire region over the last few years.

But they have not given up, says Open Doors’ director of Africa services:

“Your investment is not only keeping these kids off the streets and one step further away from despondency, but also building something into their lives that no one can take away.”

India

STANDING FOR JESUS IN INDIA: ‘I CAN NEVER LEAVE CHRIST’

Shanti*, a wife, mother and believer in India, offers a beautiful testimony: “I have experienced the love and peace of Christ in my life. I have been to temples and other worship places, spending money to get healed. But it was Christ who healed me on whom I have spent no money—all He wanted was my heart.

“I and my family can never leave Christ for the mere pressures of humans.”

Shanti’s words are even more powerful when you know what she has endured for her faith. She and her family have been beaten by their relatives and excluded from their community because they are seen as traitors for leaving Hinduism to follow Jesus.

Your prayers and support have helped Open Doors’ local partners provide Shanti and her family with medical assistance and food aid.

“I am so grateful to God for this organization that stood by us in this difficult time. God indeed places encouragers during tough times to build up our faith.”

Like so many believers in India who suffer for their decision for Christ, Shanti continues to pray for opportunities to tell others the good news of the gospel.

“Even though we are persecuted, we still want to reach those who are in darkness without the gospel,” she says. “That is what my heart wants.”

—— Shanti, a wife, mother in India

Your support is emboldening persecuted believers to share the Good News.

Your support is helping displaced children continue their education.
PERSECUTION WATCH

What’s happening with God’s people in places where following Jesus can cost the most
“Secret believers in Afghanistan are especially vulnerable. Prior to Taliban rule, they already had a very difficult time living out their faith, as they had to keep it secret from their families for fear of being shunned, or worse, killed.

“Now that the Taliban is in power, their vulnerability increases tenfold. It would be almost impossible to be a follower of Jesus in this country. This is the time for us to ask God to have mercy not only on His people, but on this country as a whole.”

— An Open Doors source in the region that includes Afghanistan

In more and more parts of India, sharing your faith has become a life-threatening proposition. Our partners shared Ravi and Sumi’s story:

Every morning, Ravi left his home with the intent of telling people about the Jesus he had found—it was the joy of his life. His passion came with a high cost, however. Their local village cast out Ravi and his wife, Sumi, and Ravi was threatened and beaten by villagers. Finally, Hindu extremists kidnapped Ravi and shot him to death.

His martyrdom left Sumi a widow at 25 with four children. Yet even in her devastation, she leans on God’s Word, specifically Isaiah 41:10, for her comfort. She refuses to let go of His protecting hand.

“If needed, I will die for Jesus—but I will never leave Him,” she says. “I will continue the ministry of my husband. I do not worry about anything, even my children—they will be taken care of by God. Our God is still Emmanuel, and He will never leave us.”

Pray with Sumi for God’s protection, that He would be her provider and husband, and that her children would develop strong faith as they remember their father and see Sumi’s witness.
Central Asia

Registration required, registration denied

Believers in Central Asia gather in small house churches for safety. But they are still constantly watched by the police.

Brother O, pastor of a small house church (for the church’s safety, we can’t disclose the country where they live), knows of surveillance firsthand. His small house church was raided while they were worshiping. “Police asked the deacon of our church for legal documents for our meeting. They took him away and strictly warned him not to hold religious events anymore.”

The church was charged with illegally using the home for religious activities, which requires official church registration with the government. “We submitted all the necessary documents, but the registration is still not given to us,” Pastor O told our local partner inside the country.

Pray with Central Asian believers that these restrictions will be loosened, and the raids will stop, so they can worship in peace and share their faith without fear of arrest.

Eritrea

Elderly pastors arrested at midnight

For church leaders in Eritrea, following Jesus carries a constant risk of being pressured, arrested and thrown in jail. The prison system in Eritrea is expansive and brutal, and Christians can be behind bars for years in shocking conditions.

Authorities don’t hesitate to detain older believers, either. Recently, in the middle of the night, authorities arrested two elderly pastors, Pastor Ghirmay, 75, and Pastor Samuel, 74. The men were taken to an unknown location.

Police also attempted to arrest Pastor Georgio, 72, but when they arrived at his home, they found him sick in bed. Still, they placed him under house arrest until he is well enough to be taken into custody.

Georgio has already served five years in a prison camp and other prisons in the past. For him, the prospect of returning to the conditions of prison at his age is heartbreaking. In Eritrea, Christians are often imprisoned in metal shipping containers in intricate mazes of underground tunnels that makes visiting them virtually impossible.

Pray for these pastors and their families as they undergo physical persecution even in the latter years of their lives. Pray their faith remains strong and their lights burn bright through this trial.

Algeria

It’s persecution, not an inspection

We take for granted the freedom to attend worship at the church of our choice. But in many countries where persecution is severe, that option may not be available for believers.

This year in Algeria—North Africa’s third-most populous country—authorities forcibly shut down 16 churches. Christians there are asking the worldwide Church to pray the churches will reopen and more churches will not be closed.

Since 2006, it has been illegal for any building to be used for non-Muslim worship. Under the guise of inspecting churches for safety, officials demand to see a license that the church is allowed to operate. The government has not issued a single such license since 2006, and so the churches are closed.

Pray with our Algerian brothers and sisters in Christ for their churches. Ask God to ease the regulations around non-Muslim worship, giving Christians the freedom to worship.
Give a gift that keeps on giving!

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.

For more information, please contact Karen Schneider at 800-659-5965, visit OpenDoorsUSA.org/PlannedGiving or email her at karens@odusa.org
For 735 days, we prayed for him. With each court hearing and each delayed verdict, we poured out our hearts and voices for the pastor from Black Mountain, North Carolina. As the leader of a small Christian church in Turkey for 25 years, Andrew never expected to be standing before a Turkish court facing multiple charges, including espionage and terrorism, and a collective sentence of 35 years—essentially life in prison for the then-50-year-old husband and father of three. He never expected to be a political pawn in a legal case that would rise to Washington, D.C.’s highest halls of power.

And he never expected to be physically, emotionally and spiritually tested for two years in a crowded prison in Izmir, Turkey.

On October 12, 2018—two years after a series of four hearings and postponed verdicts—Andrew was found guilty and sentenced. The same day, in a whirlwind of events and emotions, he was released and, in 24 hours, was in Washington, D.C., meeting with the president.

Recently, we sat down with Andrew and his wife, Norine, to talk to them about those two years in prison, how God has worked in their lives over the last three years and why they say their ordeal was so much bigger than them. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.
Andrew and Norine, millions of people were praying for you, including the Open Doors community. Did you sense people’s prayers in prison?

Andrew: My two years in prison were marked by what I would call the silence of God, and not having any sense of His presence. Because my past experience with Him was really rich, to have that intimacy removed led to a fence around my heart toward God. Woundedness.

I was the only Christian in prison, and the only Christian I had any contact with throughout my two years was Norine. I was very alone, isolated in my faith. I prayed for peace so much. I did not feel much peace. Grace was taking me through, but finding strength, determination, peace and joy was actually much more difficult than I expected. So I didn’t feel people praying for me. I had grace, but it was an unfelt grace. My first year in prison, I broke repeatedly.

Were there specific times that were harder than others?

Andrew: I had a number of bad times, having been thrown into prison for the first time. I had been held in detention centers before that. Being in solitary confinement was very difficult. When I went on trial, that was initially very difficult. The first year, especially, is when I broke physically. I lost 50 pounds. I broke emotionally. I went into that spiritual crisis.

Still, I had this desperate need to know that people were praying.

Norine: Each time we met, he said, “Are they still praying?” Because it would be natural for people to move on to the next crisis. So that was something he kept coming back to.

Did you have a sense of what God was wanting to do?

Andrew: I came to see during my imprisonment that actually, God was using this to draw in prayer for Turkey in an unusual way. In 2009, God had said to me, “Prepare for harvest.” I came to see that being in prison was part of that assignment. That just by me being there, I was the lightning rod that was drawing in prayer God intended to use for the region.

People have told me, “I’d wake up in the middle of the night and pray for you.”

Norine: I think God was doing many, many things. But one of the things was bringing praying for the persecuted into children’s hearts and minds. I heard about the prayer more than he did, and I understood earlier on that this was something happening for Turkey.

For those who prayed for us, we really want you to know how grateful we are and that your prayers accomplished much more—they’re sowing into the spiritual harvest in Turkey. Your prayers were behind everything that happened.

Andrew, how was the second year in prison different?

So my first year was a breaking year. I broke, thoroughly, repeatedly, and then God rebuilt me. One of the things I believe He really wanted to do in me was show me how to devote myself to Him and be faithful—in the absence of feeling His presence and the normal means of encouragement.

“Even if I don’t see His love or His faithfulness, even when I don’t have His presence or His voice, and I don’t feel any grace, am I going to be faithful to Him?”

Am I going to embrace Him, in spite of my circumstances? In spite of feeling abandoned, am I going to be faithful? Am I going to pass this test and just press into Him?

In my weakness, at the bottom of my pit, I knew I might only be able to turn slightly in His direction, but even if I turned one degree toward Him, that was all the difference in the world than turning one degree away. That mindset positioned me into a place where He could begin to rebuild me.

Andrew, are there one or two things you learned in prison that changed how you look at your faith today?

There are actually a number of things that came out of my imprisonment in my own heart. Even though it was two years of the silence of God, I came out with a different intimacy, more confidence in my relationship with Him, which comes from having been tested and proving myself. It’s the difference between a soldier who has been trained and has skills, and one who has the same training and skills but has also been in battle.

That’s powerful.

And I came out loving Him more because I paid a price for Him. I feel like I’ve invested in this relationship.

Norine: Kind of like when we invest in our kids’ lives. We pour so much of ourselves, our money, our resources, our love, our time and everything into them, that it’s just very precious.

Andrew: I’m also much more focused on Heaven. Before prison, I obviously loved Him; I was in ministry. But even more now, I’m living for that day I stand before Jesus. What we’re really aiming for is to make it safely home. That’s what really matters. Are we faithful to the end?

Julia Warren is on staff with Open Doors. To listen to Andrew and Norine share their story, download the Open Doors Podcast episode 10 from our website.
A MISSING SEAT AT THE TABLE
When Sele’s father was killed for his faith, it could have meant the end of his family. But God had other plans.
In the Middle Belt of Nigeria, 13-year-old Sele is dressed in his Sunday best—a modest suit consisting of a white shirt and a pair of trousers decorated with black piping. Nearby, his family is getting ready for the Christmas Eve service, ready to worship God in their finest clothes.

Tomorrow, they will return for the Christmas Day service. You might think that attending two church services in such a short period of time would be the last thing a teenager would be excited about. But not Sele.

“My favorite thing about Christmas is the dramas we watch in church and the songs we sing, and how they share Christmas gifts,” he says.

After the church services, Sele’s family and neighbors enjoy a humble meal and sing together. And if there is a little extra money, each person might open a small gift.

But during dinner, there is an empty seat at the table. The celebrations are a little quieter than they ought to be. Something is missing—something the family is painfully aware of. Sele’s father is not there.

During the evening’s celebration, Sele picks up a photo of Solomon. In it, you can only see Solomon’s side profile—but even from that angle, the resemblance between father and son is obvious.

Cecilia remembers, “There was smoke everywhere. The last call we had [from him], Solomon said I should go home and take care of the children. He said everything in town was on fire, but I should stay calm ... My heart was troubled. I sat down, and I tried his number [several times], but it wouldn’t connect.”

The next day, Solomon had still not come home. “Later that day, they told me that my husband was killed, and his body was brought to a hospital close to our neighborhood,” Cecilia continues. “I hurried there. Outside I saw his sweater (discarded on the ground).”

In the afternoon, someone came to the family’s house with a shovel to bury Solomon.

“It was at that point I began to scream and shout.

“When my husband was alive, we were living peacefully,” Cecilia continues. “He was a farmer and provided for all our needs.”

The day Solomon was killed, his attackers undoubtedly knew they had struck at the heart of a Christian family’s future. Cycles of violence against Christians have left countless widows and their children in deep economic strife. When Solomon was killed, the chances were good that Cecilia would become yet another widow exploited by her in-laws, left to fend for herself with hardly enough to keep her children under a roof, fed and in school. It was easy to imagine Sele as another boy without his dad, growing up desperately poor and completely alone.

But God never left Sele’s family, and the attackers’ plan failed. “I decided to hold on to Jesus,” Cecilia says.

AN ANSWER TO PRAYER

“My concern was just to feed my children and make sure they go to school,” Cecilia says.

Thanks to Sele’s uncle and aunt, his family has a house to live in. “This house you see behind me, is an answered prayer; God blessed me with it,” explains Cecilia.

Cecilia has managed to carry on farming without her husband. In the afternoons and over weekends, the family cultivates the farmland surrounding the house. She and her kids must work long, hard hours, but it has helped keep them fed and clothed.

For some children, the field surrounding their house is as far as their future will go, simply because there’s no extra money for school.

“Sele never knew his dad, Solomon,” explains Sele’s mother, Cecilia. “He died when Sele was just two years old.”

“He was killed in 2011 for being a Christian.”

‘WE HEARD GUNSHOTS EVERYWHERE’

Sele may not remember the day of his father’s death, but it’s forever seared into the memory of Sele’s mom. “My husband died in 2011, on a Sunday,” Cecilia shares. “That morning, he went to the market. His cousin had died, and I was preparing food to take to the family’s house.”

Cecilia and the children were waiting for Solomon at his cousin’s house when suddenly attacks broke out. The family knew that Christians were likely being targeted. “We began to hear gunshots everywhere,”
But thanks to your support, Sele can go to a school where he can study and dream of making an impact on people’s lives.

Sele’s school is not just any school. The classroom is simple, and so is the furniture. But every pupil has their own desk space, and a teacher neatly dressed in a dark suit delivers a well-prepared lesson. It’s all very structured and far removed from what it could have been: an overcrowded place where students battle for a space to sit and limited supplies.

In the classroom, Sele studies hard. He is focused and participates enthusiastically. The school has helped Sele dream about his future—dreams the extremists who target Christians wanted to stamp out. “My favorite subject is mathematics because I love calculating, and after school, I like to read my books and do my assignments.

“I love my school,” Sele says. “My teachers teach me very well, and they are helping me to become what I want to be. When I grow up, I want to be a doctor; I want to save lives and help people.”

GROWING IN WISDOM AND STATURE

Sele’s school is also a place of spiritual growth. This is a Christian school where it’s safe for Sele to pray and share his faith openly. The school emblem, stitched to his shirt, proudly shares their motto: “The fear of God.”

Sele’s favorite Bible story is that of David and Goliath. “I want to be like David, who had faith in God and defeated Goliath,” he says.

Outside during a break, Sele is surrounded by a group of boisterous, energetic friends. It’s easy to spot him as he kicks around a small, deflated soccer ball—his shirt buttoned to the neck, and his pants cuffed to fashionably hide the seams that have been taken out. He’s found a community here and grown into a boy who loves Jesus and His people. Even with the loss of his dad, Solomon, and the long-term ramifications for his family, God has redeemed the life of Sele and his family, telling a story through them of His love and hope.

While visiting Sele, our field team wanted to surprise him with a Christmas gift. They called beforehand to ask his mom Cecilia what he needed. Shyly, she admitted they didn’t have any spare money to even think about new clothes. Her teenage boy had outgrown the clothes he had. So our team gave Sele a new formal shirt, trousers and an illustrated Bible.

The joy and surprise he displayed is priceless.

Sele looks happy and wholesome, something that seemed unthinkable after Solomon’s death. But God provided Sele with a faithful mother, loving relatives, great community and brothers and sisters abroad who continue to enable his education.

“I want to say thank you to the brothers and sisters who are helping me to pay my school fees; may God bless them,” Sele says.

Cecilia echoes these sentiments. “I thank God for Open Doors,” she says. “They are helping me, especially with Sele. They constantly come and visit me, and always support me with Sele’s school fees. We thank you a lot ... Especially Sele, after each of his exams, when he receives the results, he asks me if I can call the [Open Doors] office to tell them he came first in his class!”
Sele's father was killed in January 2011, during a religious crisis that engulfed Plateau State, the region of Nigeria where the family lives. The violence and killings were set off by a series of bomb blasts on Christmas Eve (2010) in two Christian communities, which led to hundreds of Christian and Muslim deaths in the weeks of unrest that followed.

In the years since Solomon's death, violence regularly plagues Plateau State, particularly the city of Jos. It often starts with political power struggles, fought out along ethnic and religious lines. Christians say these complexities have been used as an opportunity for radicals to weaken the strong Christian presence in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

The Middle Belt of Nigeria is a place where the Islamic north and the Christian-majority south meet and intermingle.

For generations, the people there have lived side by side. But increasingly, religious violence threatens the lives of Christians—and makes it difficult to follow Jesus in Nigeria.

Because of your ongoing support, Open Doors provided scholarships to more than 600 orphans in 2020, despite COVID-19 lockdowns.

By the end of 2021, we hope to provide scholarships to 1,450 orphans in Nigeria.

Join us in thanking the Lord for His faithfulness as a Father, so visible in Sele’s life.

Pray that Sele will continue to study hard at school and that if God wills, he can one day study medicine.

Pray Sele will follow David’s example and always put his trust in God first and seek His will in whatever he does.

Pray the Lord will protect Sele and his family from harm so that they can continue to be salt and light in their community.

Pray for Christians in Nigeria who have experienced so much violence. Ask God to heal His people in Nigeria and provide hope and peace.

Pray that Sele and millions of other Christians in sub-Saharan Africa will have a peaceful Christmas celebration this year. Pray that the hope and joy they experience, despite their circumstances and because of Christ’s birth, will be a testimony to all those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior.
She’s wearing reindeer ears, a glittery dress and a big smile: Rafif is 100 percent ready for Christmas. She stands on her toes to add an ornament to the top of the Christmas tree and points to the happy Christmas decorations around the house she shares with her mother and grandmother. “Christmas is always lovely,” says Rafif. “You giggle, you laugh and most importantly, you spend time with the people who you love.”

Rafif kneels next to a nativity scene situated in a papier-mâché cave: there is hay, along with puppets of Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus in His manger. “My father made this,” Rafif says, carefully adjusting some figures in the scene. “I never knew him, but by setting up this nativity scene each year, I feel he’s there at Christmas a little bit.”

Eleven years ago, when Rafif’s mother was pregnant with Rafif, her father, Raddif, went out for what seemed to be a normal day of work in his shop near the University of Mosul. It was not a normal day.

Raddif saw the danger more quickly than anyone else. The university was the only one in the region at the time, and Christian students came to college there from surrounding villages. Raddif noticed explosives, ready to detonate, at the arrival site of the buses from Christian villages.

“When he saw the bomb, he ran towards the bus and shouted and waved at them,” Rafif tells us. “He told them, ‘Don’t move, or we will all be dead.’” The bus drivers listened to Raddif: They all stopped. Because of Raddif’s heroic action, only one of the targeted young Christians died.

But he paid with his life. Raddif died without ever meeting his daughter.

“They hated Christian people,” Rafif says when we ask if she knows why the extremists had targeted the Christian buses. “They wanted to get the Christians out of this world and out of this country; that’s why they tried to kill them.”

‘I MISS MY DAD’

A few days later, Rafif is at her church, which is also colorfully decorated for Christmas. Parents drop off their children, and some stay to chat with one another for a little bit, while the kids run to their friends immediately. For Rafif, watching these moments can be painful.

“I miss my dad,” she says. “Especially when I hear my friends talk and say, ‘My dad did this with me, my dad brought me that.’ I have asked God: ‘Why did You take my father away? Why did You do this?’”

While most children still have their father, none of the children at the church are strangers to persecution.
Even at their young age—the kids here are between 8 and 12 years old—all share horrifying memories of when ISIS overtook this area of Iraq in 2014.

For some, the memory might be seeing their church change into a refugee camp overnight; others still have nightmares about men with long beards taking the last few coins from their pockets, which was all they had left. Everything else was left behind. Many children never returned to the house they lived in before ISIS came. Rafif, for instance, is from Mosul, a place still deemed too unsafe for Christians to return.

For the tens of thousands of Christian children in Iraq, it is essential to start building a relationship with the Savior born in a manger—persecution was in the past, but it is also in the present and might spike in extreme ways in the future. That is why Open Doors invests in these children with the help of local partners and churches.

**FINDING THE SAVIOR IN THE MANGER**

Rafif’s church is one of the places Open Doors has supported. The Christian education class she attends is one of the ways in which the children are encouraged to grow in their relationship with the Lord and follow Him despite ongoing persecution—and the fear of increased, future persecution.

The head teacher, Mrs. Moshriq, leads the 20 teachers who educate the kids at this church. With the support of Open Doors’ partners, the church has become a Center of Hope, a place that helps the Christian community with a variety of training and support. “We divided the children in age groups,” she says. “We tell them stories, but we also do activities so that they feel like they are part of the story. If we don’t support these children spiritually, they will not be able to overcome the pain and suffering that they encounter.

“It is important for the children to feel at home in the church and make the stories their own,” Mrs. Moshriq continues. “We start eight weeks before Christmas, sending them daily online lessons about the story and the meaning of Christmas. We also continue our weekly meetings. We then help the children to tell the story of Christmas in their own words, or through a little play. On Christmas Day, they then contribute to the service.”

The lessons help Rafif work through what happened with her father. “There are stories in the Bible where people save the lives of other people,” Rafif says. Then, she jumps up in excitement. “When I hear those stories, I think: ‘Hey, that is my dad! He also died to save the lives of others, just like the special people in the Bible.’”

The Bible has become more familiar to Rafif thanks to the classes. “You know, whenever I feel like I am not in the right place, I read the Bible,” she says. “That gives me confidence that I am in the right place.”
Rafif knows Iraq is not the only place where children are persecuted for their faith. All over the world, millions of children miss their parents, face violence or are discriminated against for their faith. “Every one of those kids should have a Christian education class like I do,” Rafif says. “They need to know their roots, and they need to know what the truth is, what the reason is they suffer.

“The most important thing I have learned in Christian education class is that God is always there for me; He never leaves me.”

With that, Mrs. Moshriq gathers the children, who each find a place to sit and grab their music sheets, perfectly socially distancing in the pews. In the darkness of this country filled with persecution, the children have found their spark: Jesus, who came to this earth and still is with us. Rafif’s lips form the words of the song they sing together. The girl who lost her dad, who endures persecution now and in the future, sings out: “Today, we are gathered with joy. The enemy has been defeated and our fear was taken away. Jesus was sent down from heaven, glory to Him who sent Him to us.”

Open Doors works through local church partners in Iraq to strengthen our youngest brothers and sisters.

With your support, we supply children with Christian books and deliver practical items, such as tables and chairs for their church schools. Church teachers are trained in the best teaching techniques and receive funds to set up learning activities for children. Thanks for your gifts and prayers to support these little sisters and brothers around the world.
Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Dawn and I have been married for 20 years. Dawn is a discharge planner for a local hospital, and Mark is a retired pastor. Dawn is also a quilter, and Mark enjoys trains.

When did you first become aware of persecuted Christians?

Growing up in the church, we both were told about those who were persecuted for their faith. We have actively been involved in ministry for the persecuted church for over 15 years. Open Doors USA has been a big part of our ministry.

What’s a place you have a heart for?

We have a heart for all persecuted Christians everywhere, but have a burden for those in the Middle East and Nepal.

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I am a retired high school Spanish teacher, having taught 40 years. Ever since my personal salvation at age 21, I have had a deep interest in missions. Over the years, I read much about missionaries and missionary outreaches. Because of my love of writing, I devoted time to corresponding with missionaries.

When did you first become aware of persecuted Christians?

In the early 70s, I read God’s Smuggler by Brother Andrew. Then I started to contribute to this ministry and began to receive the monthly newsletters, which I carefully read. Also, I began to have a prayer burden for our suffering brothers and sisters.

What’s a place you have a heart for?

I have had a burden for North Korea for many years because of the horrific persecution that they must endure. When I read stories about the pain and suffering that believers and others endure, I find it heartbreaking.

How do you serve the persecuted church through Open Doors?

We do a number of things to promote the awareness of the persecuted church. Dawn started something we call “Cards for Christians in Chains”; we have the children and youth departments in our church make and write Christmas cards to those who are in prison for their faith. Mark spends a lot of his ministry time traveling and speaking at churches, telling stories of those who are being persecuted for their faith.

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

Remember, God commanded us to serve in the name of Jesus. We are promised that all who want to live godly lives will suffer. Nothing we do for the Lord is too small; God uses ordinary people just like you and me to do His work here on this earth, so just get out and do something. We can all pray, and that is the number one thing that our persecuted brothers and sisters ask for.

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

We have a heart for all persecuted Christians everywhere, but have a burden for those in the Middle East and Nepal.

How do you serve the persecuted church through Open Doors?

I write a monthly article about an Open Doors story for a Christian newspaper in Ohio. I gave my pastor a copy of the World Watch List. He places a copy of a different country from the World Watch List each week in the church bulletin. My church has given me opportunities to speak each year on IDOP Sunday.

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

Without a doubt, I strongly believe that our suffering family around the world is an encouragement to us. No matter the pain, loss or untimely death, they remain faithful to the Lord. We will face insurmountable difficulties in life; we can reflect on the fact that the persecuted believers continue in their faith and trust in Jesus.
Looking across the street, I noticed the boy and his father at a little stand that I first mistook for a food vendor. As I got closer, I realized the stand belonged to a tattoo artist, and to my great surprise, the boy, about five years old, was in the middle of getting a new tattoo on his wrist.

To many in the West, seeing a small child getting a tattoo on the side of the road would understandably be a strange sight, but this was no ordinary tattoo. It was the Coptic Cross, and it is common among the Copts of Egypt to get the tattoo at a young age, permanently marking themselves as a member of the Coptic Christian community.

It’s difficult to overstate the significance of this. The Coptic people have faced centuries of overt discrimination and persecution. They are a minority in Egypt, and openly practicing their faith in the wrong city or at the wrong time can get them beaten or arrested. They often serve as scapegoats for imagined crimes. To mark oneself permanently and clearly as a Copt is to make a bold and public declaration of faith and community to the world, one that could cost dearly.

For me, the brave act of this young boy and his family serves as both a call to be bold in my own faith, and as a reminder that the victims of persecution we advocate for are often only just starting out in life.

In 2014, the kidnapping of 270 girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, most of whom were Christian, led to the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. Everyone from First Lady Michelle Obama, to Angelina Jolie, to Open Doors USA urged Nigerian government officials to help secure their release. Today, more than half of those kidnapped have returned, though others, including Leah Sharibu, a Christian girl taken in 2018, remain hostages.

Finally, in 2021, an advocacy case in a closed nation that remains confidential due to security concerns has led to a father being reunited with his wife and young daughter, released from jail after they were imprisoned separately for telling others about Jesus.

In all of this, I’m reminded of the incredible compassion Christ has for children, perhaps nowhere more clearly stated than when He exhorted His disciples to “let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these (Matt. 19:14).”

Much work remains. In China alone, millions of Christian parents may not legally take their children to church, where egregious regulations criminalize the attendance of anyone under 18 at religious services.

For this reason, we must continue to advocate on their behalf, speaking out boldly to governments and officials: “let the little children come to Jesus.”

After all, if a young Coptic boy is willing to tattoo the cross of Christ to his wrist as a bold declaration of faith, how can we fail to stand up for him and so many others like him when they face persecution? The simple answer is: We can’t.
Around the world, persecuted believers speak to the uncomfortable reality spoken of by the prophet Isaiah—something many Christians think of as the “already, and the not yet.” Christ has already died and risen, but He hasn’t yet returned to set things right, and this tension is visible every day in places around the world where it’s hard to follow Jesus.

Christian kids in one part of Egypt illustrate this tension perfectly. “During religion classes, the teacher lets the Muslims stay in their classrooms while forcing Christian children to go down to the playground and collect garbage [thrown away by the Muslim students specifically to make Christians pick it up],” says Justine, an Open Doors partner. “However, when a Christian teacher tried to interfere to stop that cruel farce, she was threatened by the school management with firing, which made her step back and withdraw because it’s her only source of income.”

And yet.

“I see Christian children on the right track growing in their spirituality,” Justine says. “Children become aware and understand how their faith is grounded in reason and become confident and able to defend their faith and reply to tough questions in diplomatic ways so as not to be harmed by others.”

Christians in Egypt and around the world show the truth of living for Jesus—someday, He will come again and restore everything. But even now, He’s at work, bringing healing in the broken places.

REFLECT

Isaiah 40:3-5

A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

PRAY

Almighty God, we thank You that You sent Your Son to deliver us from our sins and to begin Your healing of all creation. We thank You for the signs that, even in a broken world, You are working to help and save us. We pray especially for Christian kids in Egypt as they follow You. Please strengthen their faith, help them grow in wisdom and seek after You. 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.
Pray for Persecuted Christians

From anywhere with the Open Doors Prayer App

Text PRAYER to 32500

Message and data rates may apply