

OPEN DOORS

MAGAZINE



Hope for the Middle East

Hope at the Centre

2021 | Issue 4

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WHAT IS A CENTRE OF HOPE

At a Centre of Hope, local Open Doors partners can reach their communities with hope and help. Some are hosted in church buildings, some are in low-cost, newly constructed sites and others are in repurposed buildings.

Through Centres of Hope, Open Doors partners can provide vital food and other relief aid, medical care, trauma care, children’s classes, Bible training, business microloans and more.

There are 40 designated Centres of Hope in Syria, and dozens more in Iraq. Open Doors partners also work with 90 other churches in Syria - with the aim of working with another 12 new churches every year.

“Christians in Syria love their country,” says Mourad*, a local Open Doors partner who coordinates work in Syria. “They don’t want to leave if the minimum of their needs is met. When they have food, security and can meet in a church, they will remain. That is why we need to continue to stand with them, to give them hope.”

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hope at the Centre

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life”

PROVERBS 13:12

As we came out of lockdown, I thought a lot about the importance of hope to pull us forward. Hope is such a powerful and beautiful gift from God. That’s exactly what Centres of Hope offer to Christian communities, and others, in the Middle East – they bring hope to people who are desperately in need.

So many Christians fled Syria and Iraq during the terrible conflict, and those who remain face the pandemic on top of extreme rejection, isolation and persecution. Miraculously, despite the dangers, the church in Syria and Iraq is seeing many new believers come to faith from a Muslim background. Praise God! Courageous men and women are learning the truth of Jesus and choosing to follow Him, even if it costs them dearly. And it so often does. It’s heart breaking to read about the persecution these Christian converts encounter.

But the good news is that Christians are God’s family, and it’s a family that sticks together. On p4, you can read the

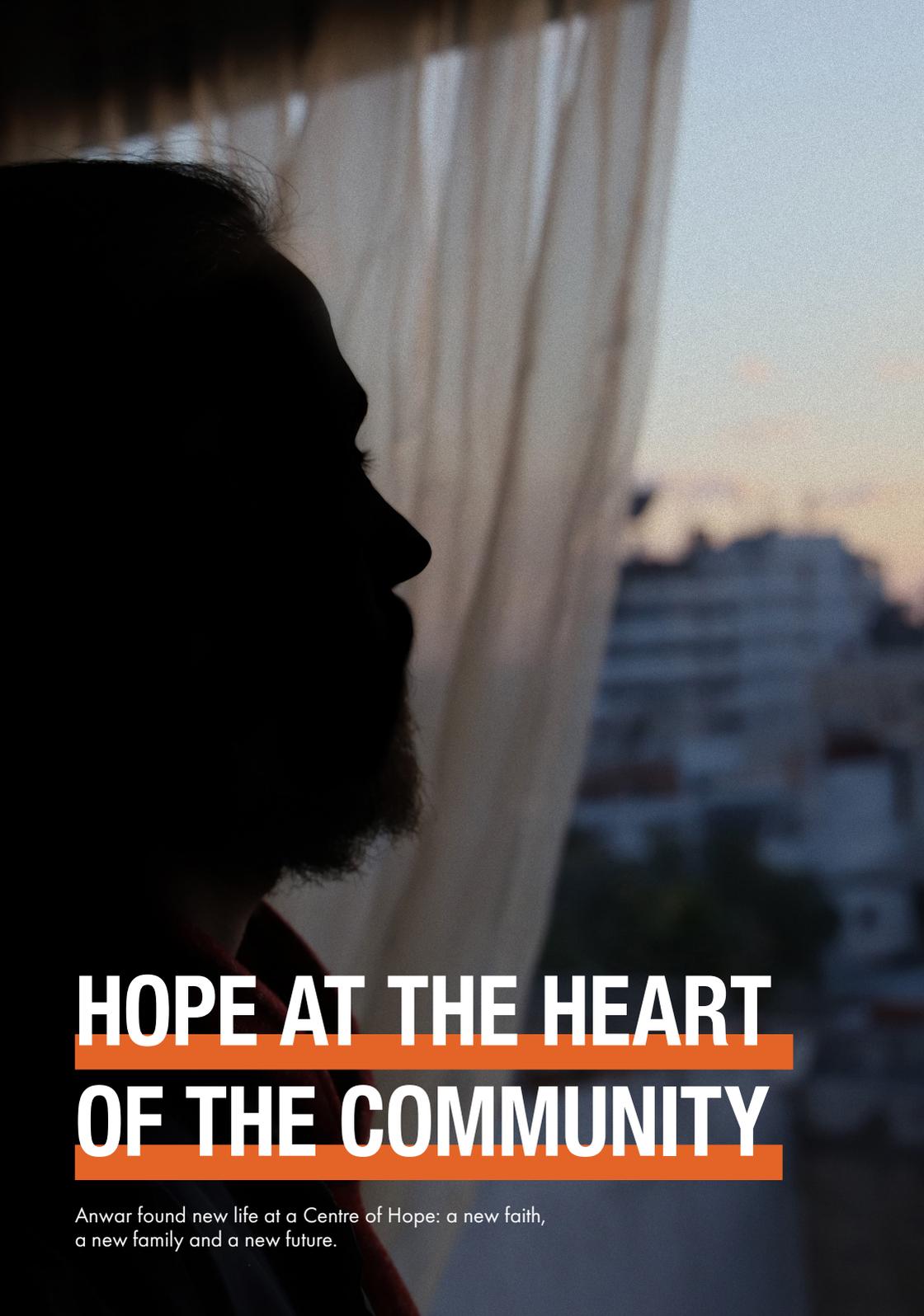
extraordinary story of Anwar*, a sheikh’s son in Syria. Anwar’s family rejected him when he became a Christian, but he found hope and a new family at a Centre of Hope. And now I’m delighted to say that he is helping others at the centre himself.

Thanks to you, Open Doors partners are supporting more and more people through Centres of Hope. The centres not only provide basic supplies, they provide love, community and a future. They provide hope – both for believers and for others in desperate need.

We’re six years into Open Doors’ Hope for the Middle East campaign, and I know many of you have supported it every step of the way. Thank you and let’s keep going! We know that hope involves waiting (Romans 8:24-25). So let’s keep praying, supporting and encouraging the church in the Middle East to keep shining the light of God’s hope to their communities. That’s life in God’s kingdom!

Cover image: Joseph fled his home in Syria when so-called Islamic State invaded. Now, thanks to your support and a Centre of Hope, he is home and running a small business

*Name changed for security reasons



HOPE AT THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

Anwar found new life at a Centre of Hope: a new faith, a new family and a new future.

The past is filled with destruction, the future uncertain. So where is the hope for Syria and Iraq? Anwar, rebellious son of a sheikh, found new life in Jesus. He found a new start at a Centre of Hope, the church at the heart of his community in Syria.

Anwar* wanted to end his life. He believed he had no hope, no future. But God had another plan.

The strict Alawite faith of his sheikh father proved inaccessible for Anwar as a child. When he asked questions about Allah, he was always told he needed to wait. Wait for a certain age, wait till he could memorise a certain prayer, wait till he follows a certain rule, until waiting was no longer an answer for him.

"I say to people who are going through the same circumstances, 'Have courage and trust the Lord because it's worth everything.'"

War was raging in Syria. Anwar was living alone, failing and facing expulsion at college, depressed and enduring severe stomach pains. He planned to kill himself, and he might have done, had he not struck up a forbidden friendship with a Christian.

Nothing to lose

"My friend said 'If you want to end your life then you have nothing to lose, why not try to talk to Jesus and see what he has to tell you?'" says Anwar.

"I remember thinking that I was a crazy person for talking to myself. But after a while I became addicted to knowing Jesus. I completely forgot about suicide. One day I remember I started crying, I poured my heart out to Him, and suddenly I wasn't alone anymore. I have a friend, Jesus."

Following Jesus comes at a cost. Anwar had to pay the price of his family. He says, "If they found out the truth I would be in danger, I could be killed, kicked out of the house, deprived of my inheritance and disowned."

Anwar couldn't utter the word 'Jesus' in front of them. He was under a lot of pressure, especially since he used to hear stories about people who converted and got slaughtered, attacked or imprisoned.

"I remember when my friend took me to the church for the first time in the city, I didn't hear the sermon nor the songs, I was preoccupied by the fear of someone recognizing me and telling my family."



Churches in Syria are becoming Centres of Hope, transforming the landscape of destruction and offering Christ's hope to their communities



Children in Centre of Hope, Mashta Al Helou with their picture Bibles. Centres of Hope offer a brighter future to the next generation, despite the difficult struggles of their lives so far.

Secret unleashed

It was a secret that couldn't be kept. Word got out that the son of the sheikh was attending church, and the news was devastating for his family.

"I heard that my mother had a nervous breakdown. After a few hours, my sister called, crying. She said, 'Don't ever come back here, my mother is in hospital because of you, you are no longer my brother'."

When Anwar returned home after a Christian conference, he found his room had been cleared and his bags had been packed. His brother told him to leave the house, yet he had nowhere to go.

Left with nothing, Anwar found a new start at a Centre of Hope – a church equipped to help people in the community in their darkest moments. Thanks to your support 40 churches have become centers of

hope. These centres have kept hope alive for tens of thousands of families – providing emergency aid, trauma care and income generating projects to help people rebuild their lives.

"If it wasn't for the Centre of Hope, I think I would be homeless, hungry and alone."

"We work now with about 130 churches in Syria," says Mourad*, co-ordinator or Open Doors' work in Syria. "We are widening our presence and our network in the country with about twelve churches each year." The long-term goal is to support every church in Syria and Iraq to become a centre of hope, strengthening the Christian presence in the region.

Addicted to Jesus

The Centre of Hope helped Anwar to

rent a room and find a job. And now he works at the centre, giving hope to the next generation and teaching children English. Anwar's favourite part is to talk to children about Jesus and pray together at the beginning of every day. He says, "Children don't just need a teacher; they need someone who has a relationship with God and can influence them positively."

Thanks to his own experience of new hope, Anwar is able to share his relationship with God. He says, "The Centre of Hope gave me a new beginning in my life, after my old family became like strangers to me. Now I've met a new family in the church, they compensated me for the things I've lost. If it wasn't for the centre, I don't know what I would do, I think I would be homeless, hungry and alone."

* Names changed for security reasons

Your support and prayers can provide a new hope and a new beginning to believers in Syria and Iraq facing the long term impact of economic collapse, persecution and the pandemic.

PLEASE PRAY

Please join Anwar in praying for his family and friends, that they will experience the freedom and purpose he found in following Jesus.

Please give thanks for the churches that have become Centres of Hope in Syria and Iraq. Pray that Open Doors' vision to equip more churches will bring hope to communities amid destruction.

PLEASE GIVE

Every HK\$500 could provide food and medical support to a believer struggling to survive.

Every HK\$650 could give Bibles to five children to help them grow in faith.

Every HK\$1200 could pay a month's rent for a persecuted Christian, giving them somewhere safe to live.



CENTRES OF HOPE PROGRESS REPORT

Iraq

Syria

Nineveh Plains, Iraq



65% of churches about 125 congregations have become Centres of Hope.

We work in 25% of the churches, about 130 congregations. 40 of these have become Centres of Hope.

54% of total houses destroyed now rebuilt, that's 14,828 homes. 10% of these funded by Open Doors.



The faithful remnant in Syria and Iraq are holding onto hope because of Open Doors' long-term commitment and the courage and sacrifice of church leaders.

With your support we want to transform each church in Syria and Iraq into a Centre of Hope, helping local Christians with hope-giving projects, ranging from discipleship groups to trauma care trainings and income generating initiatives.

Through our local partners, we help these centres of hope grow stronger, while reaching out to more churches.

"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Matthew 25:40

Hope for the Middle East

In Syria, over the first five years of Open Doors' Hope for the Middle East campaign, you've...

- Given 1 million food parcels to vulnerable families
- Provided 75,000 hygiene kits a year
- Built more than 500 houses so families can rebuild their lives
- Ensured 15,000 families can survive difficult winters each year
- Created 1,734 income-generating projects including shops, restaurants, small businesses
- Trained 12,000 believers each year
- Helped Open Doors to partner with 130 churches in Syria to provide spiritual and practical help to their communities

And much more – let's keep going!

FORGOTTEN FAMILIES FIND MISSING HOPE



When Sana's husband and sons were kidnapped by Islamic State, she kept silent. But now, more Christians like Sana are telling their untold stories – revealing the depth of need for Centres of Hope in Syria and Iraq.

Sana's husband and sons have been missing for seven years, yet she still has hope for their return. Centres of Hope keep hope alive in Syria and Iraq.

"Where are you going, Mum?" asked Sana's son, Issa, as she boarded the bus without him. He looked frightened, but Sana didn't know the answer. She asked one of the IS extremists in charge to tell her, but he put a gun to her head. "Either you shut up or I'll shoot you in the head."

Issa hasn't asked his mother another question since. It is seven years since that moment, the last time Sana saw her husband and two sons. She has no idea what happened to them, yet she hasn't given up. She says, "Maybe someone knows where my missing husband and sons are. I have hope."

She remembers a dream Issa had one night, that helps her sustain hope. "He suddenly opened his eyes. He told me that he had a dream in which he saw Jesus descending in shining clothes. He looked at Issa and smiled," she says.

Untold stories

Many stories like Sana's remain untold. "People outside of Iraq may know how IS treated the Yezidis," explains Father Ammar, from the local church and Centre of Hope. "But what people don't know is that IS also captured a lot of Christians."

Yet life continues to be difficult for Sana. As well as her trauma and loss, she must deal with the stigma of her new and unwelcome situation. In a Middle Eastern country like Iraq, it's frowned upon for women to live alone. Official papers are usually arranged by the men in the house, some places aren't safe to go to as a woman alone.

Besides, there is no significant mental health care system in Iraq to address the complex range of issues facing the Christian community today. This is why,

with your support, Father Ammar provides help for people like Sana at the Centre of Hope.

Church offers hope

"We have rebuilt a lot of our houses and churches," Father Ammar says. "But IS destroyed much more than just that: they destroyed human beings."

Centres of Hope provide practical help, such as legal support or microloans to start income-generating projects, but they also provide the emotional support that is so essential for recovery after the trauma of war and destruction in Syria and Iraq.

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

Healing from persecution takes time. That's why we need your continued help for the church in Syria and Iraq to be a Centre of Hope in the midst of ongoing turmoil.

Please pray

- For your brothers and sisters and let them know that they are not forgotten.
- For more church to become Centres of Hope, sharing Christ's love in their communities.

“FOOD OF THE SOUL”

After the trauma of war, Iraqi Christians are receiving precious Bibles and rebuilding communities, thanks to you.

If you only had a few moments to leave your home, knowing that you might never return, what would you take with you? Jalila (75) from Iraq took her Bible. During her long displacement away from home, she was sustained by God’s Word – and now, thanks to your prayers and support, more Iraqi believers are receiving their own Bibles.

In 2014, so-called Islamic State (IS) extremists swept through Iraq, forcing Christians from their houses and burning down homes, villages and towns. Jalila’s town in the Nineveh Plain was on their target list, and so, as the extremists approached, Jalila found herself with not much time – and a difficult decision on her hands. But she knew the one thing she had to take with her. “The Bible is the food of the soul,” she says. “It is the most important thing in my life. I stood in front of the bookshelf, not knowing if I would ever return. I took my Bible with me and asked the Lord to protect the rest of my home as we left.”

Jalila ended up in a refugee camp – a church hall shared with other families. Although her circumstances were challenging and her future uncertain, her Bible sustained her. “Through the Bible, I listen to His voice. I know the hand of my Saviour is with me,” she says. Each day, Jalila would gather others in the hall to study a Bible verse



together. Thanks to you, Open Doors local partners were able to supply more Bibles for those in her study group!

Jalila has since returned home, after her town was liberated from the Islamic State extremists. She still has her original Bible. And, while her eyesight isn’t what it used to be (she uses a magnifying glass to read the small text), she is still sharing God’s Word – now with her grandchildren (left). Thanks to you, they have all received their own Bibles, along with other books to help them understand their faith. Her grandson, Aram, says, “I share the stories I read with my friends in school.”



STIRRING UP LOVE IN THE FACE OF HATRED

Jalila is one of many believers who drew extraordinary comfort from her Bible when persecution arrived. School teacher Bashar (35) began to read the Bible when he was threatened by Islamic extremists. “We were the only Christian family in our neighbourhood in the city,” he says. “Extremists told us they were going to ‘clear the ground’ of Christians. They hated us. It made me depressed and scared. I thought I was useless.



Jalila, Bashar and Sedar (l-r) passionately love God’s Word - and you are helping them share the Bible with others

“But one day I had a vision from the Lord; I saw Jesus being baptised in the Jordan, and I saw myself next to Him. A dove landed on my shoulder and said, ‘Stay strong, I will never leave you.’”

As Bashar started reading the Bible, God changed his life: “I started to love myself and the people around me. I am here to testify to what Jesus has done in my life.”

“We need to rebuild our lives with a strong base. The Bible is such a base.”

‘THE MOST IMPORTANT BOOK IN THE WORLD’

It’s so easy for us to pick up a Bible in a shop, or online, or even on our phones. But in Iraq, it’s far more difficult to obtain a copy of God’s Word. Through your gifts and prayers, Bibles are being distributed by Open Doors local partners like Ramy*. Every morning, he loads up his van with Bibles and other Christian literature and sets off around the country. His work has become more difficult due to the pandemic: the borders between different regions are closed and special permissions are needed to pass. But God is faithful, and the Bibles get to where they need to go.

Ramy’s delivery route often includes churches.



Sedar is 21; she is passionate about her church and the Bible: “I would like to tell people to come to Jesus with all their difficulties and struggles. It’s good to pray together when we feel weak. And we shouldn’t forget about our Bible: reading the Bible gives inner peace.”

Thanks to you, these precious books are encouraging our sisters and brothers in Iraq who are rebuilding their communities after the invasion of IS. “The Bible is the most important book in the world, it is the book that teaches us most,” she says. “We need to rebuild our lives with a strong base. The Bible is such a base.”

* Names changed for security reasons

PRAY

- Praise God that He is transforming lives and communities through the delivery of Bibles
- That more Iraqi Christians who hunger for God’s Word would receive their own copy
- For God’s protection and wisdom for Open Doors local partners who are distributing Bibles

GIVE

Every HK\$650 could give Bibles to five children to help them grow in their faith



DO NOT BE AFRAID

“Do not be afraid”: the first words that the angels gave to the shepherds still resonate with all of us over 2,000 years later. So often the steps that bring us closest to God take some courage – this year, that perhaps even included returning to a church building for a service, after months of online gathering.

But whatever happens in the rest of 2021, we know that, as always, we will be celebrating the birth of Jesus this Christmas, along with our persecuted family around the world.



IRAQ: LYDIA AND YOUSSEF

In the Christian town of Qaraqosh in Iraq, the church is packed on Christmas Eve. Everywhere in the city you find lighted Christmas trees and other decorations. The house where Lydia, 11, and her family live is decorated inside and out. “We are very happy and ready for Christmas!” she says.

Only a few years ago, this city full of Christmas spirit was dark: For almost two years militants of the so-called ‘Islamic State’ occupied the city. The majority of inhabitants fled; many of those who stayed were killed or abducted.



Lydia started preparing for Christmas early: “We started at the first of November to learn about the story of the birth of the Jesus in my Christian education class. We read a part of the Bible each week and we answer the questions that the teacher gave us.”

The memory is still fresh with Youssif, 12. A verse from the Bible and a prayer he has learned during the Christian education class he attends helps him in difficult times:

“The Lord said, ‘Do not be afraid’. I pray to Him and say:

We need you today and every day, lend a helping hand and protect us from the harms, we are begging and trust on you, to bless the coming year.

Amen

As we emerge from lockdown, none of us knows exactly what is in store for us towards the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. But Christmas is a reminder that God is with us. And if God is with us, then we do not need to be afraid.

A NEW HOPE AND A NEW FUTURE STARTS HERE.

Support persecuted Christians like Anwar in Syria and Iraq through centres of hope.

"Without the centre of hope, I would be homeless, hungry and alone," says Anwar (pseudonym), whose family disowned him for his faith.

The centres are a lifeline to Christians facing the impact of economic collapse, persecution and the pandemic. They provide discipleship, relief and trauma support. Most of all they provide hope.

Your support can equip more churches to become centres of hope for their communities in Syria and Iraq.

Every HK\$500 could provide food and medical support to a believer struggling to survive.

Every HK\$650 could give Bibles to five children to help them grow in faith.

Your faithful prayers and support keep hope alive for Christians in Syria and Iraq.

Make a donation today:

www.opendoors.org.hk

Thank You!

We are a tax-exempt charity (under Section 88 of the Inland Revenue)

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