

OpenDoors

MAGAZINE

MAY | JUNE 2026

**“IT WAS A
MASSACRE”**

**TERRORISM, GRIEF,
AND COURAGEOUS
FAITH IN SYRIA**



STRENGTHENING CHRISTIANS WHERE FAITH COSTS THE MOST

www.opendoorscanada.org



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Open Doors Canada
 8-19 Brownridge Rd.
 Halton Hills, ON L7G 0C6

(905) 636-0944
www.opendoorscanada.org
opendoors@odcan.org



/OpenDoorsCanada

Cover image: Lives were ripped apart when a suicide bomber attacked this church. A year on, Elias and his family remain in Syria. But they need your help. Read more on page 4.

GARY'S TAKE



Pastor Gary Stagg
 Executive Director
 Open Doors Canada

Dear Friend,

On Sunday, June 22, 2025, while Christians gathered for worship in a town near Damascus, a suicide bomber attacked, turning a place of prayer into a place of terror and grief. In the days that followed, the world saw a familiar temptation: to let terror set the terms of faith – silence, retreat, suspicion, and despair. Yet Syrian Christians, like many believers who endure violence across the globe, answered fear with a different kind of courage.

Resilience is not denial of danger; it is the stubborn decision to keep loving anyway. It looks like mourning together, naming the loss, and still returning to the sanctuary. It looks like communities rebuilding windows and trust, choosing forgiveness over revenge, and refusing to let extremists define their neighbours. It looks like global solidarity as churches and Christians in other countries pray by name for families they've never met, supporting them, and advocating for them.

Christians do not claim immunity from suffering; they claim that suffering is not the final word. The cross teaches honest lament, and the resurrection teaches resilient hope. In the midst of fear, scripture steadies our hearts: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). When terror strikes, the church's witness is often quiet but unmistakable: hymns are sung, bread shared, and a people who keep showing up – because fear is real, but faith is stronger.

Grace & Peace,

Pastor Gary Stagg



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FAITH OVER FEAR

Lives were ripped apart when a suicide bomber attacked this church. A year on, Elias and his family remain in Syria. But they need your help.

The attack took just 30 seconds.

Thirty seconds for a suicide bomber to kill 22 Christians. To destroy Saint Elias Church, in Damascus, Syria. And to leave this family broken and reeling.

Elias, 56, and his wife Hanan, 39, will never forget what happened on Sunday, June 22 last year. They lost seven family members. "It was a massacre," says Elias. "We went through 14 years of civil war, but an assault inside the church is unheard of."

The father-of-five thinks back to the moment when 300 people in the church were startled by the sound of gunshots...



A MASSACRE

“The door was thrown open, and we were assaulted by a terrorist shooting left and right,” remembers Elias. “My brothers, Boutros and Geryes, charged and tackled the terrorist. But he detonated his explosives.”

The blast killed people instantly – and plunged the church into chaos, confusion and fear. “You cannot imagine the scene,” says Elias. “The church turned red.”

A shard of metal hit Elias in the thigh, and he was bleeding badly. His two brothers and a sister were killed. Meanwhile, Hanan searched for the children in panic. “I started shouting for them, saying to myself, Lord, please let me find one more child,” she says, holding back tears.

“I saw a girl with blood coming out of her eyes. Her face was swollen and her hair was burned. I looked down and recognized the shoes she was wearing – and realized it was my daughter.”

Elias, Hanan and their children survived. But while the attack lasted only 30 seconds, this family lives with the trauma and memories every day.

DWINDLING CHURCH

Conflict and persecution have

driven thousands of Christians to leave Syria in recent years. In 2011, there were around 1.8 million believers. Now, the church numbers just 300,000 people.

The bombing at Saint Elias Church struck at the very heart of a dwindling community. Many believers no longer feel safe going to church. But, even amid fear, faith is alive. Recently, 22 children were baptized at Saint Elias, the same number of Christians who lost their lives in the June 2025 attack.

“We go to church, but fear exists. Yet even if we are afraid, we will still go,” says Hanan, her words filled with fearless defiance. Leaving Syria may be an option in the future. But for now, they remain: “If it is God’s will, we will stay.”

“FAITH BUILT ON ROCK”

Recently, the family returned to Saint Elias Church for the first time since the bombing. Workmen pause while the family light candles at the altar.

Elias leans on a crutch, and metal pins protrude from his leg. The children, Elen, Sarah, Taqla, Ibrahim and Christina, are nervous. A car horn sounds outside, and Ibrahim panics and flees with his siblings. Their trauma is raw and easily triggered. “The children fear the smallest sound. They think

they’re being attacked,” explains Hanan, sadly.

This family carries deep scars, but they know one thing for certain... “We experienced faith and fear here. But we know the Lord will not forsake us,” says Elias. “Our faith is built on rock, not bubbles of soap.”

At Open Doors, our vision is to strengthen the bold faith of Christians like Elias, Hanan and their children. Dozens of church leaders in Syria have been trained to run trauma healing workshops, and Elias and Hanan’s children regularly attend sessions in Damascus.

Raneen*, a trained psychologist who leads Open Doors’ trauma healing in Syria, says, “True healing is found in Jesus Christ. We want to bring people back to God.” But this vital work can only happen with your gifts and prayers. Families like Elias and Hanan’s depend on your support.

Back at his home, Elias picks up an icon of Jesus as the Good Shepherd that he saved from the church rubble, still marked with dried blood. “We live day by day,” he says. “We have no ambition but to remain faithful.”

**Name changed for their safety*

Will you support faith that defies fear?

PLEASE GIVE

Every \$35 could provide persecution survival training to a believer to help them persevere.

Every \$40 could provide trauma care to a Christian who’s faced extreme persecution.

Every \$74 could give essential support to a Christian family in a time of crisis.

PLEASE PRAY

- Pray for Elias, Hanan and their five children. Ask God to strengthen their faith, heal their wounds, and empower them as witnesses to the Lord’s goodness.
- Pray for Open Doors’ local partner in Syria, who has lived through war, violence and disasters. Give thanks for their service to the Syrian church and pray for strength.
- Pray for faithful remnants of believers everywhere, who keep following Jesus despite fear, loss and persecution. Pray they will know they are not alone.

DEFIANT FAITH, AND YOUR PRAYERS

Across the Middle East, persecuted Christians are holding on. Remaining, despite pressure to leave. Faithful, amid fear. They urgently need your prayers.

PRAY WITH SETAREH, IRAN

Setareh* froze, her heart racing. At the beauty salon where she worked, a woman had just walked in wearing a small cross around her neck. Setareh approached discreetly... “Do you believe in Jesus?” she whispered. “No, but I like him,” replied the woman.

It was a crossroads moment.

Should Setareh tell the woman about Jesus? What if she was a spy? There were rumours the Iranian government were cracking down on Christian converts. Was Setareh putting herself in terrible danger?

“In that moment, I felt God’s presence with me,” says Setareh – and she boldly shared the gospel.

The woman came to faith in Jesus, followed by two family members.



Today Setareh is a courageous and powerful witness in Iran, leading groups of young believers and providing home-cooked meals to street children and homeless adults.

Now, Setareh needs your prayers:

- Give thanks for Setareh’s courageous faith, and ask God to strengthen her.
- Pray for protection and wisdom in her ministry. Pray Setareh will continue to see fruit.
- Pray for courage, protection, and perseverance amidst conflict in Iran and the Middle East.

PRAY WITH ZAID, YEMEN

Zaid* waited nervously on a street corner. What he was about to do could get him jailed. Even killed.

Soon Zaid spotted the man sent by Open Doors partner, Alaa*. They shook hands and walked together to a nearby public swimming pool. It was a busy day. The pair found a corner and slid quietly into the water. Zaid continues the story...

“The man asked me two simple questions about my faith. Then he baptized me. In and out of the water. Then we got out and left. I never saw him again. That was the first time I met a Christian face-to-face in Yemen.”



It was a milestone moment, the culmination of a long search for truth and meaning. Zaid had first encountered Jesus in a dream. He met Alaa online and, one text message after another, Zaid’s faith and understanding grew.

“For 18 months I went on a discipleship journey with Alaa. I never met him, I didn’t even hear his voice,” says Zaid. “But the more time I spent with God, the more He changed me. I am a new creation in Him!”

The decision to be baptized was costly for Zaid. His father beat him, and his family disowned him and threw him out. But even though many Christians leave Yemen because of persecution, Zaid is determined to remain. “I want to stay and serve my people,” he says.

Today, Zaid depends on your prayers and support:

- Pray for believers like Zaid to be courageous and faithful witnesses of Christ.
- Ask the Lord to renew the strength of Yemeni believers amid conflict and isolation.
- Pray for deep fellowship, unity and encouragement among Yemeni Christians.

*Names changed for their protection

LIGHT IN DARK PLACES

Zaid* has a vision: 40,000 active house churches across Yemen. Your support is strengthening this brave leader – and fuelling a powerful ministry.

Following Jesus in Yemen is about as hard as it gets.

This Islamic nation, south of Saudi Arabia, is among the top three most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian. Converts face the death penalty and most believers keep their faith secret. Meanwhile, years of war have left the economy shattered. Hunger and hardship are rife.

But Yemen is where God has called Zaid* – and, in a tiny Christian

community, your gifts and prayers are strengthening a remarkable leader.

“I remain here, with my family and my brothers, because it is important to wake them up,” says Zaid, who grew disillusioned with Islam as a teenager and started searching for truth. “Yemen needs Jesus.”

Your support meant that when Zaid first came to faith, he was discipled by an Open Doors partner. Now, your gifts are resourcing Zaid’s

‘discipleship house’, where new believers can meet, live together and learn about God.

“My vision is to have 40,000 house churches in Yemen,” he says, “One for every 1,000 Yemenis, so they can enjoy fellowship and grow together.”

FUTURE HOPE

Zaid takes courage from Paul, in the New Testament. “Paul lived in a dangerous place, similar to me,” says Zaid. “He was surrounded by Pharisees; I’m surrounded by extremists. But Paul transformed his community from darkness to light. If Paul can do it – and he is a human being, just like me – then I can also do it.”

In Zaid’s secret discipleship house, new Christians gather to study the Bible and discuss difficult questions. The country’s future house church leaders will come from here, Zaid hopes.

Your financial support is vital, of course. But above all, Zaid values your prayers.

“Not long ago, we asked for specific prayers and received a voice note on WhatsApp,” says Zaid. “We played the recording at our meeting. It was amazing... Like a spiritual recharge for our batteries. Not only for me, but for all present. We are very

encouraged to know you are praying for us.”

Thanks to your steadfast support, Zaid has fearless faith – and, because of you, he remains in Yemen. “God was with the early church, giving them the capability and resources,” says Zaid. “And He is with us. We should go to the dark places. We are the light, and we carry the light within us, so that everybody gets to see it.”

**Name changed for his protection*



PLEASE PRAY

WWL
03

- Give thanks for Zaid’s courageous ministry, and pray for God’s protection on him.
- Zaid says, “Pray for peace in Yemen... peace from war but also spiritual peace.”
- Lift up the secret believers attending Zaid’s discipleship house. Pray for faith to grow.

FINDING HEALING, THANKS TO YOU

Your support put Jenny on a path to healing after her father was killed. Now, she's helping other believers traumatized by violent persecution in Syria.

Jenny was chatting with a friend outside her home, enjoying the warm evening, when an explosion ripped through the peace – and her world changed in an instant.

Suddenly, messages started flying around. The blast was at St. Elias Church... A suicide bomber... People were dead... Her father had been at Mass, he wasn't answering his phone...

"At that moment, I felt everything ceased to exist," remembers Jenny. "I was shaking all over. I sat down because I couldn't stand up."

Jenny raced to the church, in the Dweila area of Damascus, Syria. It was a scene of chaos and desperation. Then to the hospital. Jenny's father was in surgery, badly wounded. But soon the news came: he had not survived.

Jenny was shocked, heartbroken and numb with grief. But in her darkest days, you were there – and your prayers and kindness put Jenny on a path towards healing.

LOVED AND SUPPORTED

"We were shown affection by everyone, including all churches worldwide," says Jenny, when she thinks back to the days after her father's death. "We knew there were people who loved us, who shared our sadness, who were affected by what we'd been through."

Your support has helped to train trauma counsellors in Damascus – and Jenny is one of them. The techniques she learned helped her process her own grief. "I knew I was experiencing trauma and post-traumatic stress," says Jenny, "so I tried to help myself using methods that would support me."

Now, strengthened by you, this courageous woman is volunteering as a counsellor to help other young victims of the Saint Elias Church bombing. "It's my duty to stand beside them and support them, just as I received support along the way," she says.

Your generous gifts mean trauma healing is available to children and adults, through group or individual sessions. The program mixes biblical teaching with counselling

methods, and the focus is on bringing people back to God. Faith can help people heal – but violence and persecution, like the church attack, can spark doubts.

"The fear people faced needs time, but time heals," says Jenny. "God is all goodness. When we go to Him, there is no better place. We need to be in our church. I hope the churches will go back to being full to the brim."

She added, "Prayers are what we need most right now. We need divine help to get through what we are facing."



PLEASE PRAY

- Pray for Jenny as she continues to heal from the grief and pain of the bomb attack.
- Give thanks for the Syrian Christians trained by Open Doors to provide trauma healing.
- Jenny says, "Pray for the children to be strong. It is hard for them to forget what they saw at Saint Elias Church."

FAITH IN MOTION

WALKING FOR THE PERSECUTED



Last summer, members of Assemblée Chrétienne de Cap-de-la-Madeleine in Trois-Rivières, Quebec, hosted a multi-kilometre walk through their town to raise money for women living under extreme persecution around the world because of their faith. After more than seven days and 180km, our friends then hosted a concert at their church, inviting their community to learn about those who are persecuted and discriminated against for their faith.

In the end, they raised over \$10,000 to support women suffering from

persecution. This June, they plan to walk again, this time focusing on children and families.

This is just one way that Canadians can make a real difference in the lives of the persecuted church. If this is something that you would like to do, please reach out to Open Doors Canada. We would love to assist you in making your event a success. Email us at opendoors@odcan.org or call 905-636-0944.

CHURCH WITH NO HOME

TOUR

Join us for this in-person event to hear stories that will help you connect with your brothers and sisters who have sacrificed everything to follow Christ.

Sunday, May 24 - 6:00pm

Journey Church
10307 Eamon Rd NW, Calgary, AB

Monday, May 25 - 6:00pm

Rocky Mountain Alliance Church
5304 57 St, Rocky Mountain House, AB

Sunday, October 4 - 7:00pm

International Worship Centre
1077 St James St, Winnipeg, MB

Sunday, October 25 - 7:00pm

MCI Montréal
5685 rue Chauveau, Montréal, QC

***Sunday services in Alberta and Ontario.
Visit website for dates and locations.**



More dates coming soon!

Visit www.persecutedchurch.ca or scan the QR code to see all upcoming events.



STRENGTHEN

WHAT REMAINS Revelation 3:2

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WHAT REMAINS Revelation 3:2

Will you support faith that defies fear?

Elias and his family were in church when a suicide bomber attacked. 22 Christians were killed. Their lives were ripped apart. But they're still here. Faithful. Now they urgently need your support.

EVERY \$40 could provide vital trauma care to a Christian who's faced persecution and violence. "We experienced faith and fear here," says Elias. "But the Lord will not forsake us."

Give now at www.opendoorscanada.org or call (905) 636-0944. Thank you.

Open Doors Canada 8-19 Brownridge Rd., Halton Hills, ON L7G 0C6
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