

To the Least of These

Story by Christmas Beeler



Bringing Hope to Those Traumatized by Terrorism

Above: Murray Byrne invites children at a camp to strum a guitar he held. Photo by Jarrett Petero

Left: Pastot Skip Heitzig, Calvary Albuquerque, shares worship songs with Iraqi refugees, a group made mostly of Yazidi children that had escaped from the ISIS terrorists. Photo courtesy of Samaritans Purse

More than two million Iraqis have been displaced since ISIS militants began their campaign of terror. In response, believers have been ministering to persecuted Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, and Muslims—many of whom are now open to the Gospel.

On a rocky hill outside of Dahuk, Iraq, about 620 men, women, and children share one toilet in an unfinished concrete building. Inside, the air is full of stench, and cold. The children are uncharacteristically quiet—nearly

half have painful scabies rashes; all of them are hungry. Most have no shoes, though there is ice and snow on the ground. There is no insulation, no heat, and often no electricity. But worse than the cold and the hunger is the continual gnawing fear that the bad men will return, the Islamic ISIS militants called “Daash” in Arabic. These young eyes saw parents or siblings murdered or snatched in Sinjar. One man lost his wife and all of his children—13 family members. Dozens of their mothers and sisters were captured, and no one can say if they are alive or dead. It is this fear that keeps the children quiet and inside the concrete walls.

Almost everyone in the camp is from the same clan of Yazidi—a religion that blends Zoroastrianism and ele-

ments of Christianity. More than 100 people took shelter in the large vacant building last August when the terrorists captured the Northwestern Iraq towns of Zumar and Sinjar, causing more than 200,000 people to flee for their lives. For this group at the Kora School, it has been a difficult winter. The only people helping them are American Christians and a handful of local Christians. For the past several months, Samaritan’s Purse, a relief organization headed by Franklin Graham, has sent workers there several times to provide basic necessities and make longer-term plans with the leaders.

On this cold afternoon, more foreign Christians enter the settlement. There is a slight tension at the presence of outsiders. Yazidi men watch them warily, though

a few Yazidi sit on the filthy floor with vacant stares. The Samaritan’s Purse staff show the visitors where the new septic tank will be dug and introduce them to the camp leader and others. The children are curious but afraid, hanging back in the shadows. Suddenly the tallest stranger, a man named Pastor Skip, pulls out a guitar and starts playing. The children’s ears perk up at the sound of music, and they slowly gather around. As the men sing Christian songs in English, a white-haired Lebanese pastor translates some of the words. The children are suddenly clapping and laughing, trying to sing along—free in that moment to make noise, to be children. Some of the adults smile, watching the little ones jump and giggle. A few Yazidi men pull out their smartphones to record the happy moment.

“It was like a break in the clouds, to let the sun come through,” recalled Skip Heitzig, senior pastor of Calvary Albuquerque, NM. “You could see the parents were happy because the children were having fun.”

Among the 11 people on the mission team were Skip; one of his assistant pastors, Jarrett Petero; Ken Isaacs, Vice President of Programs and Government Relations for Samaritan’s Purse; and a Beirut-based pastor named Sami Dagher, church planter and president of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Lebanon. During the 9-day exploratory trip in late February, they visited camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and several Christian churches in Beirut, Lebanon, and Erbil, Iraq. The trip was an effort to join forces in Jesus’ name and reach out to those driven from their homes by ISIS.

“We want to partner with groups who are there and share our vision of ministering to children and victims of terror,” Skip explained. He and his wife Lenya raised nearly \$145,000 to provide terrorist relief through Lenya’s nonprofit group, Reload Love. About a third of that money will help the Kora School install more sanitary facilities and create a child-friendly space for children to play and go to school, aligning with Samaritan’s Purse’s efforts.

Jessica, a Samaritan’s Purse worker who regularly visits Kora, explains that many of the children have lost nearly a year of school. She talks to the women, who worry about the young ones. “The children need safe spaces to play. They live in tight living quarters—with about 20 family members in each family’s small [8x8] section of the building. When they lose power for hours each day, they just sit in the dark and think about what they have lost and the trauma they have been through. They need a place to go



Above: Child refugees from Mount Sinjar gather to get a glimpse of the American visitors. Photo by Skip Heitzig

and activities to do in order to change their environment and to start healing from what they have experienced.” The team left the guitar behind for Jessica to play songs for the children.

Teaching Jesus’ Love to Hezbollah Children

Though American missionaries need to be culturally sensitive as they reach out to those in the Middle East who have been traumatized by terrorism, many native Christian leaders share the Gospel openly in the hostile landscape. Lebanese pastor Youeel, the principal of a Christian school in Sidon, has a heart to share Christ with the students and families—the majority of whom are Muslims, half from a Hezbollah background. He teaches students stories from the Bible. Last Christmas, their families came to a play about the nativity, taking pictures of their children in costumes as Bible characters.

Skip related, “Pastor Youeel told us that he sees it as an opportunity to get hold of would-be terrorists and inoculate them with the love of Jesus so strongly that when they’re making their life choices, they’ll remember. Instead of being reactive towards terrorism—‘What do we do now?’—



Above: Yazidi children, wearing donated clothing, play in open areas by the refugee camps. Photo by Skip Heitzig

“They need a place to go and activities to do in order to ... start healing from what they have experienced.” Jessica



Above: Skip leads the visitors to the Kora school. Sami Dagher and Matthew are behind. Photo by Jarrett Petero



Above: Iraqi families forced to flee from ISIS terrorist receive boxes of supplies from Samaritan's Purse. Photo courtesy of Samaritan's Purse.

he is being proactive, to prevent it in future.” Reload Love will also send resources to support this work toward opening the eyes of Hezbollah children.

Ken explained that, in the Middle East, many people identify themselves with the religion or ethnic group of their family. Some are born into Muslim families, so they call themselves Muslim even though they have little knowledge of the faith or practice it. In some Christian churches,

the women will put on burkhas after the service before returning home.

Jarrett commented, “I had grown up thinking of Middle Eastern people as all Muslim. But we have a lot of brothers and sisters here—Christians in Lebanon and Iraq—who are making an impact in the world around them. This experience has moved me to pray for them more, for the pastors who are being a light.”

Kids Caught in the Crossfire—Reload Love

“If you take spent bullet casings and melt them down into jewelry to help children caught up in the crossfire of terrorism, wouldn't that be a miracle?” mused Lenya Heitzig several years ago. The wife of Pastor Skip Heitzig, Calvary Albuquerque, was coming out of a dark season in her life after a serious bout with cancer. She was healthy again and wanted to make a difference for Christ. By 2014 a thousand pounds of spent bullet casings had been donated by law enforcement, gun enthusiasts, and others. The casings were melted down and made into brass charms and lapel pins, which are moderately priced and sold over the Internet and locally.

“The first beneficiaries were children in Burma [Myanmar] where 100,000 children are literally on the run for their lives as soldiers are shooting, their villages burned;

landmines abounding,” said Lenya. Reload Love has also been able to provide assistance for children in Thailand and Cambodia. An additional two million children were refugees due to the conflict in Syria and ISIS's gruesome and barbaric rampage in northern Iraq. Pastor Skip's latest trip to the area confirmed the need to use resources from Reload Love. A fundraiser dubbed the “Love Bomb” was held this past Valentine's Day weekend. The goal was to raise \$50,000. However, \$145k was raised which will fund many additional projects for the youngsters.

“We dream of a day when children do not fear for their lives,” added Lenya, who is the CEO of Reload Love. “By transforming spent bullets into something beautiful, we can help heal little ones around the world whose lives have been damaged by the ugliness of terrorism.”

Sharing with Displaced Non-Christians

On another day, the team visited a large, fenced-in camp called Khanke in Dahuk with more than 18,000 displaced people; there is a medical clinic staffed by displaced professionals and hundreds of rows of dusty white tents. Ken Isaacs met with about 10 leaders in the camp—many of them Yazidi. He asked where they came from and if they had everything they needed. As Ken listened to their stories through a translator, Pastor Sami entered and engaged the men in Arabic. Ken recalled, “Pretty soon he was telling them about how God created the world and how man fell and broke that relationship with God. He told them Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate.” The men listened intently, many asking questions about God. Then Sami prayed with them. “They were open; they were listening. They know Christians are being persecuted too,” Ken added.

Pastor Jarrett spoke with the Khanke camp leader, a Yazidi man: “He told us, ‘Without America, we wouldn't be alive; we wouldn't be here.’ They are very grateful for America.”

Women at Risk

Jarrett recalled several conversations with those who lost wives and daughters: Some told him that when ISIS invaded their village, hundreds of girls jumped to their death to avoid being captured. Others whose wives and daughters were taken captive were haunted with fear for them.

At the Khanke camp, the team discovered that 11 girls had been kidnapped by ISIS, raped, impregnated, and returned to the camp. “In that culture, it is the father's responsibility to kill his daughter after she has been defiled—a mercy killing,” Jarrett explained. But relief workers are helping the families accept their daughters back and participate in family counseling. Reload Love will donate funds to this project at Khanke, as well as creating child-friendly spaces and programs similar to Vacation Bible School.



Jarrett Petero

Wisdom to Help

Ken reflected, “When we think of our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, a lot of people want to simply evacuate them. But I think purging lands of Christians isn't good—that feeds into what the enemies want. We need to be praying that God gives us wisdom and insight to help our brothers and sisters to grow in their faith despite their suffering. The first thing we can do is pray, and sec-



Ken Isaacs



Above: A Yazidi priest resides in camp. Photo by Skip Heitzig

ond is to help with the basics of life—water, food, clothing, literature—so they can stay where they are. We at Samaritan's Purse do that in the name of Jesus.”

Pastor Skip spoke with a pastor in Erbil who related how the spiritual population is shifting. “He said that years ago in Baghdad schools, 30 percent of the students were from Christian homes. Now there are hardly any. The Christians have fled to different cities; that's the plan of the enemy—to move the Christians out.”

The Next Generation

Many believers in Iraq are teaching forgiveness—especially to the children—to aid the healing process and also to prevent more killing in the future.

At the last camp the team visited, a Chaldean clergyman, Father Douglas Bazi, has helped families find peace through faith, forgiveness, and keeping the children active and learning. His church, Mar Elias, is now also a home to more than 550 people.

In the past decade, Father Douglas has been captured and tortured by Islamic extremists three times. In 2006, the militants broke his teeth with a hammer and permanently injured his back. They asked why he never begged for his

“That’s when she realized everything she had heard about Christianity was a lie. ... She said, ‘Now I finally understand who Jesus is.’”

Jarrett Petero



Father Douglas

life, like some victims. He told them they didn’t understand the true meaning of life and death, adding, “For us, there is no end. But for you, there is an end.” The persecutors respected him so much that some came to him privately to ask questions. His experience gives him a compassion for other victims.

Skip related, “He told us, ‘We don’t call this a camp; we call it a community. I don’t call these people refugees: I live with them; they are my relatives.’” The community’s clean and orderly social amenities are in the large garden area around the church. In shed-style container buildings, there is a library, a music school, and a kindergarten. Skip added, “He’s really focusing on teaching them forgiveness because otherwise, when they grow up, they’ll want to take revenge on those who have hurt them. He believes the future of Iraq is teaching the children about the Gospel and having them hear and see the love of Jesus Christ. That will change the nation, as they learn what forgiveness is.” Reload Love will help support Father Douglas’s work with the children.

The Power of Forgiveness

Other displaced people were open to the message of forgiveness in Jesus’ name. Skip taught a Wednesday night service at a Christian church in Erbil where a large lighted cross stood outside.

The building was packed with more than 300 people, many of them displaced. “The Lord impressed on me to speak about [the biblical prophet] Jonah, because many of them were from Mosul—the Ninevite province, so they are Ninevites. Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh because he didn’t want God to show mercy on those he hated. The ancient Ninevites were butchers; they cut people’s heads off. He didn’t want God to ever forgive them. I shared that God wants us to extend forgiveness, and how that can change a person’s life—even a culture. Afterward, many

came to thank me for the message, saying it had done a deep work in their hearts.”

One attendee shared her story: She had considered herself Muslim before ISIS raided her village and killed her husband and son. When she went to the mosque for help, they turned her away. So she went to a Christian church and received food and shelter. “That’s when she realized everything she had heard about Christianity was a lie,” Jarrett recalled. “That’s why she came to the church in Erbil. She said, ‘Now I finally understand who Jesus is.’”

The Erbil church’s pastor, Malath Baythoun, shares Christ with many displaced people in the city and at IDP camps; he has seen his church swell with displaced people over the past year. He explained that many Iraqis who grew up with the label ‘Muslim’ now want no part of Islam because of the atrocities. Skip related, “He told us, ‘There’s a crack in Iraq’—Islam is being seen for what it is, and that there is an opening now for the Gospel like he has never seen before.” Malath estimated that in some places mosque attendance has dropped by almost 70 percent since the ISIS attacks began last year.

Reload Love and Samaritan’s Purse will continue to stay connected with the Christian pastors and communities reaching out in Jesus’ name. 🙏

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Above: A young girl is one of over two million internally displaced persons living at camps. Photo by Skip Heitzig