



*Names changed to protect identities

PERSECUTED FOR THE SAKE OF THE *Savior*

Story by Carmel Flippen

While the Syrian city's streets echoed with sounds of war, a gathering of believers filled their church with sounds of God's praise. Despite the risk of falling missiles, flying bullets, and Muslim extremists, those who braved the dangerous journey this Sunday overflowed their pews, filled the aisles, and spilled out of the sanctuary.

Two Syrian men from the congregation stood at the front. After months of prayer for their persecuted brothers and sisters in Sudan—whose plight they understood all too personally—the church had chosen these men to plant a church in South Sudan. Soon these Syrian men from the congregation would leave this war zone only to enter an even more dangerous one. The elders gathered around them, laying hands on them and praying for them; then an offering was taken to fund their work.

The Syrian believers' money had run out. They were completely dependent on relief deliveries to eat. Nevertheless, as the tray passed through the crowded room, it quickly began to fill—with gold jewelry, watches, and other priceless family heirlooms they had hidden away.

Today, the Sudanese church these two men began, financed through that 2013 offering, has hundreds of members and a school. "They had no money but had hearts of obedience," said Brother John, founder of Ananias House. "Obedient hearts, not finances, is what God uses to plant His church. With that, He conquers nations."

Ananias House equips churches like this one, serving on the front lines of persecution. It began as leadership training for Muslim-background believers (MBBs) in John's native Syria, but has expanded to six countries and numerous projects, all geared toward one goal—advancing God's Kingdom where the cost is the highest. John continued, "Ananias House is about faithful believers who stay, like Ananias, in Acts. While the believers feared for their lives, God used his obedience to turn Saul into Paul. The Syrian church began with Ananias and today the same thing is happening out of hardship and darkness."

"Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel."

ACTS 9:15b

Relentless Faith

"Ananias House isn't just an organization," John explained. "It's a movement—born out of war, destruction, and a bloody revival; not out of flourishing, but out of need." In 2009, John was asked to come and do leadership training for a Syrian church he was connected to individually. The training became a recurring event, with other evangelical churches joining. Meanwhile, circumstances in Syria worsened. While many Christians fled, those who felt called to stay and spread the Gospel saw an unprecedented number of Muslims come to Christ. These MBBs entered the training as well. John continued, "Churches began to be planted by these MBBs, spreading the training with them. The movement exploded among MBB churches in the Middle East and North Africa. Just like Paul stood in one square in Ephesus, faithfully preaching the Gospel, and it spread around the world—that's what happened here. It all started with the obedience of believers who stayed despite difficulties."

Ananias House's Scripture-saturated training is tailored toward MBBs who have less familiarity with Scripture and face even greater risks than those raised in Christian families. Working with them, John has been humbled by their passion for God's Word and what they will endure to study it. Pastors in the most dangerous nations sometimes must sneak across borders to attend training. Some of them told John how they had been caught by border guards and beaten. As soon as the beating was over, one man lifted his head and pleaded, "Please, may we enter your country?" The guards beat them again, but they did not give up. Eventually they found a way across and joyfully attended the training. "We stayed up until 2 a.m. studying Scripture," John recalled. "Our people are trained to give their lives to studying Scripture. We want them to know and be able to interpret it well so no one can deceive them."

Many Ananias House-trained churches have grown from 20- or 50-person congregations to thousands in a short period of time. Ananias House began training 40 contacts in Egypt three years ago; now they have 480. It is clear to John that they are receiving the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work. "In the Middle East we are seeing more Muslims come to Christ in the last 17 years than in the last 14 centuries combined," he declared. "People are having dreams and visions; God is drawing Muslims to Himself."

Mohammad* was an imam in a Shiite town. Sunni radicals from the next town kidnapped young men worshipping in his mosque. That night, he heard the Sunnis celebrating as they slaughtered the men in Allah's name. Enraged, Mohammad's town retaliated the next day, kidnapping young Sunni men and slaughtering them in Allah's name. The bloodshed shook Mohammad's faith to the core. *Who is this god, he wondered, who we are killing in the name of and shedding blood for? He seems so cruel.* Doubts plagued him for months, until one day he walked past a Christian church partnering with Ananias House. The pastor was teaching on John 3:16. Overwhelmed with joy, Mohammad cried out, "I have been searching for You and now I have found You, the One who sacrificed His only Son!" Mohammad now leads a Bible study.

Partnering for a Purpose

As the churches which Ananias House partners with have continued to expand, so have the avenues through which it partners with them. It distributes Bibles, sponsors street children's education, and provides partial salaries for overstretched bi-vocational pastors. Looking individually at each church's needs, it steps in where most helpful—whether building and rebuilding in war-torn areas; or assisting in relief work which opens doors to the Gospel in communities to where refugees fled. Additionally, it seeks to connect these churches with the larger body of Christ. "Our heart is to build relationships between churches in America and churches in the Middle East," John declared. "We need American churches to come alongside us, working and serving together for the body of Christ."

Pastor Shawn Frasher of CC Morgantown, WV, was impacted by John's talk at the 2018 East Coast Pastors and Leaders Conference. "As a fellowship, we've always been actively engaged in praying for the persecuted church," Shawn explained. "The problem is, how do you connect to them?" He approached John at the conference and asked how his church could get involved. In the past,

Shawn had felt conflicted about donating to large organizations without being able to verify how funds were used. But John offered a direct, personal, ongoing relationship with a Middle Eastern church.

In October 2018, the two men took a week-long trip to a country bordering Syria. There, John introduced Shawn to Pastor Khaled.* "When I visited this pastor," Shawn remembered, "I was able to minister with him in his home, eat with him, and teach in his refugee church. It was a privilege to sit with him and hear his story. He fled Syria with his family a few years ago, and now has been working full-time while also caring for 400 refugee families who depend on his church for aid."

Two young teen boys from the church led Shawn through the alleyways and crowded streets where the refugees lived. Clotheslines of stories-high laundry and exposed wires crisscrossed above them. Everywhere were signs of unemployment and poverty. "I've heard refugee accounts, but you can't conceptualize the crisis until you see it," Shawn declared. He visited MBB families' homes, hearing their testimonies firsthand. Risk from extremists is so severe that MBBs must be very careful who they share with; one woman asked that one boy leave the room before sharing that she would soon be baptized—not because she distrusted him specifically, but to limit the number of people who knew.

[We are] always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 2 CORINTHIANS 4:10

After Shawn's visit, CC Morgantown's few-hundred-person congregation has been helping support Khaled's family. "I worked bi-vocationally for eight years while church-planting—I know that strain," said Shawn. "In his eyes I saw the fatigue of serving so many people with incredible needs, physical and spiritual." Shawn and Khaled regularly communicate, and Shawn has Skyped Khaled's family into CC Morgantown's services so they can be prayed for. Plans are being made to build a medical clinic, and they hope to develop a sponsoring program so refugee children can attend a Christian school. Shawn continued, "Morgantown is worlds away from persecution. It's one thing for me to have a heart for this; the challenge is conveying that passion to my people. This is not about sending a check. How can we come alongside them for a long-term relationship and help in a tangible way?"

Ananias House helps with legal, practical, and cross-cultural issues; but their role is primarily relational, not informational. “We follow up with both [supporting and partnering] churches,” John explained. “We say, ‘How’s it going? How can we strengthen this relationship?’ When difficulties come, we encourage both sides to push forward.” Since first speaking at CC Philadelphia, PA, two years ago, John has been encouraged by the

Calvary Chapels who have chosen to support Ananias House. Already they are the majority of his 2019 speaking engagements. “I believe God has brought the Calvary Chapel Movement alongside Ananias House for a purpose,” he testified. “The Scripture we have in our hands is the greatest gift; people are thirsty for it. What will we do with it?” 🙏

Ananiashouse.org

SHE NAMED HER SON JESUS

Story by Carmel Flippen

Maryam* and Faisal* lived in Aleppo, Syria, with their seven daughters and one son, the youngest. They were deeply involved in their Muslim community, and so strict that Maryam wore gloves in case her fingers were glimpsed inside the sleeves of her burqa.

Maryam’s seven-year-old son had a dream—he was told he would have a brother named “Isa,” the Arabic form of “Jesus.” He did not recognize the name, but his father reassured the excited boy that Isa was a prophet mentioned in the Qur’an. Deeply affected by the dream, the boy continued talking about it until, a year later, baby Isa was born.

The next year, the war began. Radicals invaded the family’s home in the middle of the night. Fearing their daughters would be sold as concubines, the family fled to a neighboring country. At the border, however, a customs official refused to let them enter, saying there was no more room. They pleaded with him as he flipped through their passports, but he was immovable—until he reached the last one. “Isa—that’s an unusual name for a Muslim family,” the man said, pausing. “Because of Isa, I will let you in.”

Saved by the Blood

In their new country, the family lived in a cramped, one-room apartment and struggled to afford basics. A local church, partnering with Ananias House, offered free food and other necessities after its Sunday service. “Be careful,” Faisal admonished Maryam on her first trip. “Don’t let anyone talk to you—they’ll try to convert you.” His concerns seemed unfounded until, one week, a woman asked Maryam if she could pray for her. “No!” Maryam cried, running home. She returned when their food ran out, however, and this time the woman simply started to pray without asking. As she did, something happened in Maryam’s heart. She began going for food earlier and

earlier, catching the sermon’s end and then the whole service. In a few weeks, she accepted Christ. She began bringing her children, who all surrendered to Jesus. Faisal repeatedly refused, though very sick with a terminal illness. Because his case was so hopeless and medical services for refugees so overstretched, he was denied needed blood transfusions. Preparing for another pointless trip to the hospital, Faisal prayed to Maryam’s God, “If you really are the God who heals, heal me.”

The next morning at the hospital, Faisal’s doctor ran blood tests. When the doctor saw the results, he was incredulous. “Who did you find to do this blood transfusion for you?” he demanded. “It was 100% effective. You’re completely healed!”

“No doctor and no human blood could give me life,” Faisal testified joyfully, “but the blood of Jesus Christ has healed me!”

The Life-Saving Gospel

A few months later, the couple was startled by a violent pounding on their door. Maryam’s brother and his imam had traveled from Saudi Arabia to kill her for the shame she brought on her family by becoming a Christian. “Just give me one day, then you can kill me if you want,” she pleaded. Grudgingly, they agreed. Maryam spent the day telling them about Jesus, and even brought them to her church. Deeply moved by all he heard, Maryam’s brother told her, “I want to follow the God you are following.” By the day’s end both men had trusted Jesus for salvation. 🙏

Today, Maryam and Faisal are actively serving in their church, where Maryam leads a Bible study. They are supported by Ananias House.