

SYRIAN IRAQI REFUGEE RELIEF PROGRAM SPRING REPORT.

Orthodox Initiative and Middle East Council of Churches

Amman, Jordan

April 2015

Christ is risen!

The Easter season is a special time for Christians throughout the world. It is a time to reflect upon our faith, gather in community, and worship and praise our Lord; resurrection is a renewal of hope.

The Middle East has seen turbulent times the past few years with wars and violence tearing apart countries and families. Millions of people have been forced from their countries, many celebrating religious feasts away from home for the first time.

At the Orthodox Initiative and Middle East Council of Churches Office in Amman, Jordan, we have been working to do all that we can for the most vulnerable. Since we began, our work has expanded to meet the ever-changing needs of our community. Originally, our work focused on the refugees fleeing from Syria in the north of the country. We provided food, clothing and other relief items to many living in refugee camps along the Syria-Jordan border. As times changed, our work adapted moving through out the Kingdom to where we could be most effective. In the past year, our work has adapted once again to accommodate the large number of Iraqi Christians who have been forced to flee their homeland seeking safety and security from the brutal violence of ISIS. Many of these Christians

have found themselves in Jordan, being hosted by local churches, often coming with few possessions. The local churches are providing all that they can in the true spirit of Christian community, however more is needed not only in physical assistance, but also in acts of community building to strengthen dignity and inspire hope.

Over the past year, we have worked together on many projects with the Syrian Orthodox Church of Amman. Early this spring, we met with members of the church to discuss the prospects of incorporating Syrian and Iraqi refugee children into the Scout program that meets at the church. Many refugee children in Jordan are having a hard time continuing with schooling and finding activities to keep busy. With the Scouts, the youth will have opportunities to learn skills, go on camping trips and adventures, and give back to the hosting community; all while being in company with other youth. As the Easter season approached, we continued to work to develop this project as the Scouts play a large role in the festivities around the Holy Week and Easter. Hoping to inspire and ease the burden of this large project, our team was able to provide new uniform shirts to the scouts in the weeks leading up to Easter, giving them the ability to start the process of incorporating more members into the program. This project has many parts and expenses; however, the potential of being able to incorporate the youth into this program will have great returns to the whole community for generations to come.

Our work with the Syrian Orthodox Church and the refugees that they are hosting continued into Holy Week. On Good Friday, we were able to provide over 300 vouchers to purchase new clothes for Easter, a step that not only meets the need for new clothes with the coming spring and summer, but also a small step in humanization by giving the guests the ability to celebrate with new clothes, a tradition during the Easter season.

In the midst of Holy Week, our team headed to the south of

Amman to visit Our Lady of Peace Center. Known for its work with the disabled, this center has recently taken in close to 50 Iraqi Christians who fled from ISIS last fall. Now living in caravans behind the center, a small community is forming. No one knew each other before arriving at the center, but they have quickly started to develop systems and structures to help them make the best of their difficult situation. Although they have caravans and a place to stay, these refugees fled their homes bringing little with them and are facing the common struggles of finding aid and resources. Our team joined a group of Jordanian women who volunteered to assist those refugees. Together, we were able to help by bringing vouchers for new clothes and both perishable and nonperishable food. We were also providing resources for beds and sanitary items to help accommodate them. Seeing this group and taking account of their stories weighed heavy on our hearts, yet at the same time, their resilience and ability to form relationships with each other through hardships and struggles reinforced our faith in the power of community. The AYA group of women are the best example of the hosting community stepping in with local NGOs and the government assisting the refugees and taking part of the burden the Jordan is carrying. Our goal is to work with them as one team as a step towards strengthening this personal initiative and empowering women in our country.

Over the past few months, our team has been working with the Armenian Catholic Church on top of Ashrafiya, in East Amman. Over the past months, we have done various distributions of food parcels and clothing vouchers to the members of this community. This past fall and winter, the church was hosting Iraqi Christians in their meeting hall, giving them shelter and safety while they searched for apartments. This space is now empty as the refugees have moved into the neighborhood, but it is still being utilized for gatherings. The Church has hopes for continuing to renovate this space so that it can be used for large events such as weddings and funerals, providing income for the church to continue its work in serving the

refugees. The workers who are renovating the church are the same refugees who first lived in the church hall, and they refuse to be paid in return for their work as they consider that this work of the Lord and a thank you to the church community for all that it has done for them.

A week before Easter, we made our way up the hill to visit with Father Boghos of the church and the Iraqi Christians to distribute clothing vouchers. We had heard that some of the children were very sad as this year, they felt left out not being able to have new clothes for Easter when many others around them did for Palm Sunday. Seeing the continuous need for clothing, and an opportunity to put a smile on family faces, we felt it necessary to bring clothing vouchers. During this distribution, only the men were present, as it is expensive to find transportation throughout the city, yet there was an air of excitement for bringing these gifts back home to families and children.

Although holidays like Easter and Christmas are opportunities for gift giving and direct assistance, it is also important to come together as a community and celebrate. This year, our team provided Easter lunch for the Iraqi and Syrian Christians at the Armenian Catholic Church. Easter weekend in Amman saw unusual weather with cold winds and rains covering the Kingdom, yet this did not stop the festivities. On Easter Sunday, our team made its way up to the church to find the hall that was once divided and full of small living spaces, full of families with children running around playing. We sat down to eat and had a delicious meal of ouzai, which is rice and meat wrapped in bread, with the Iraqi and Syrian Christians and the Church community. Although the rain and cold weather was keeping many at home, our team was able to provide buses and transportation for the guests to come to lunch, bringing warmth and happiness to the hall, as well as a token of gratitude to the refugees who volunteered to set the tables and serve. After a busy Holy Week with visits and

distributions throughout Amman, Easter lunch was a highlight reminding us of why we continue with our work. We spent a large portion of the afternoon with the refugees, hearing about heartbreaking stories, and at the same time, seeing their immense hope and continued faith in what the future holds. Although the day was cold and rainy, spirits were warm and happy.

Through out the spring, we have been continuing work on the youth center being built in Karak. After Jordan faced a long and heavy winter, progress has been delayed, yet with warm weather we have been able to continue forward. We are working on finishing projects such as painting and interior works. We look forward to seeing the completion of these projects and beginning to work to develop them into places where all members of the community can come together to meet and find support and safety, and develop programs the center can offer.

In the past years our region has faced many challenges and tragedies. However, through our hardships we have been able to come together. The Easter Season has given us opportunities to reflect on the strength of our communities, both in Jordan and throughout the world. We have been able to continue with our work in helping the most vulnerable around us, and develop new projects to move forward. As we continue, renewed from Easter, we have faith that our community and our team can continue forward stronger than ever.

Yours Sincerely,

Wafa F. Goussous – An Advocate for the Christian Presence in the Middle East

Nathaniel Bailey – Media and Communications

The Orthodox Initiative for the Churches in the Middle East
<http://www.orthodoxinitiative.org/>

Director for the office of the President for the Orthodox Family

His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III

Middle East Council of Churches <http://mecc.org/>

