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Advent in Northern Iraq

During this Advent time, we think of the people in Northern Iraq who have fled from their homes. Many of them are Christians who in the past months were forced to flee because of their belief. Like the holy family, they need the help of their neighbors. Host communities such as the Muslim population of Dohuk have supported the refugees in many heartwarming and compassionate ways.

With the help of member churches, LWF is assisting refugees in Dohuk, Northern Iraq. Through our implementing partner Christian Aid in Northern Iraq (CAPNI) we provide non-food items such as shelter, cooking kits, stoves, blankets, carpets and water and sanitation. In November, LWF has distributed winter clothing to the families.

For the Advent season, we have gathered four different stories. They tell of love, peace, hope and even joy experienced in the midst of extremely difficult circumstances.

We welcome you to share the stories and prayers in your congregation this Advent season.

Prayer

Gracious God,

As we celebrate the birth of your son, we bring to you the refugees from Iraq.

Give them today their daily bread.

Shelter them from the cold, from aggression, violence and mistrust.

Keep a candle of hope burning in their hearts, and grant them peace – peace in their country, but also peace of mind.

Be with all the people who assist them, the host communities and the aid workers. Grant them strength, open eyes and open hearts, to be able to respond to spoken and unspoken needs.

Let them keep the faith, even if the situation may seem overwhelming.

Be with all the people who have lost their homes because of violence.

Teach us to be compassionate and welcoming, to the glory of your name.

Let us be a voice for those who are not heard and advocate for justice on their behalf.

Grant us understanding and peace. Amen.

1. Advent: Love

The love of a father for his daughter is overwhelming and knows no bounds.

Standing in the cold, collecting a box of food and rice from the Lutheran World Federation that will last the family a month, five-year-old Vian Shara is bewildered. Dressed in pink, her father holding her by the wrist, she is by far the youngest at the distribution and stands out in the sea of men in dark clothing.

This is not a life of her choosing. Nor did she choose to have kidney failure, a condition that requires her to undergo dialysis every month.

Her father Saeed Shara tells their story. It is all too common: the family fled fighting in Singar, where Shara was a builder, with his wife and three other children, taking little more than what they were able to grab. Once they reached the safety of the Kurdish governorate of Northern Iraq, they were welcomed by strangers who opened their unoccupied country homes to let Shara and three other families occupy it.

Shara explains that because Vian is so weak, she will be unable to go to school, saying that even if she was accepted into the Kurdish school system, he is afraid she might contract an illness from the other pupils that her weakened immune system would fail to handle. "She would either suffer another disease or die. I don't want my daughter to die."

His daughter's well-being is Shara's his primary concern. His perfect love for his child is the greatest example of love.



*Five year old Vian Shara stands in the crowd at an LWF distribution of food in Northern Iraq. The girl has a kidney condition and needs special treatment. Her father's concern for her health and well-being are his greatest expression of love for his daughter.
Photo: LWF/ S. Cox*

Pray this Advent season for children who are refugees and those suffering from illness. Give thanks for the parents and caregivers who struggle to provide safety and security faced with hardship; and pray for strength and that the peace of God that transcends all human things will enter their hearts.



Gorgya Paols, 63, receives a LWF food voucher, entitling her to a carton of food that will last a month. Despite the violence she fled in 2005 and the worsening situation since the ISIS insurgency, her single wish is for peace in Iraq. Photo: LWF/ S. Cox

2. Advent: Peace

“My only wish is for peace in my country,” says Gorgya Paols, aged 63. That is all. She wishes nothing for herself. She simply wants her people to be free of the tyranny of endless cycles of violence, the most recent being attacks by ISIS on the Assyrian people, driving them from their homes with nothing but the clothes they wore.

Having already fled from Al-Qaeda in Baghdad in 2005, the ISIS uprising has made Paols’ situation worse. Persecuted for

being Christian then and now by ISIS, she has extra reason to fear for her life. She shares a small house with her husband, and her son’s family of five.

“I love my country so much”, she says. “I don’t want to leave, like every Assyrian in this area. It makes me sad and I hope the people who have left might one day be able to come back to live together peacefully, happily. Every day, someone is leaving and I must say goodbye. Most recently, it was my neighbor.”

Her sick husband needs her constant care. She struggles to pay for medication and equipment to ease his discomfort. On this day, she has received a months’ supply of food from the Lutheran World Federation. As an elderly woman, she’s escorted to the head of the queue of mostly men, standing in the cold drizzle in a town covered in thick cold fog, close to the Turkish border.

She would like to spend the rest of her life living happily with her neighbors, without the threat of further upheaval. Her situation is dire but she has the courage to wish for peace – for herself and her country.

Pray this Advent season for peace in the many places of unrest, war and insecurity in the World. Give thanks for churches, organizations and individual people who are reaching out to help their neighbor in need. Pray that no person will have to endure persecution because of their belief.

3. Advent: Hope

The mayor of the remote Kani Mase district in the mountainous far North of Iraq, near the Turkish border, has good reason to hold on to hope. In 1991, he fled into the mountain to escape attacks by the Saddam Hussein regime. He and his family holed up for three months before venturing back home.

Five months ago, his small town ballooned as over 600 families, uprooted by violence, made their way to his town. Exhausted and carrying only what they could grab – if anything at all – the new arrivals urgently needed safe places to stay. Sami contacted the owners of unoccupied houses saying he was going to open their doors and let the visitors stay. All the homeowners consented – and waived the rent.

For many of the people forced to abandon within seconds a life they had spent years creating, hope lies in the prospect of life in another country, a safer place. They live in the hope that their application for refugee status and resettlement will be accepted, in countries as far off as Australia.

The district has snow on the ground and is inhospitable terrain but the mayor sympathizes with the plight of the people who have found refuge in his town and urges them to hold on to the hope that life might one day return to normal.

“I don’t encourage people to leave and go abroad. Here is where they can start a business, have a life – a better life – and get a job. We hope that one day, the Christians and Yazidis here can return to their villages, to Mosul, and can have their own lives again. I’m not encouraging Iraqis to just go and never come back. There is uncertainty now but hopefully it will not last forever.”

Pray this Advent season for those who live in hope of returning to their home land and their home towns. Give thanks for the witness of people in situations of conflict as they open their homes and hearts to those in need and as they hope for a better future. Pray that we will equally open our hearts and homes to welcome the stranger among us.



The Kani Mase mayor draws on his own experience of fleeing violence to encourage persecuted Christians and Yazidis to keep hope alive. The LWF supports new arrivals with food and other relief goods. Photo: LWF/ S. Cox



Six month old Mate Talb is the darling of the church community center near the city of Dohuk. He brings joy to the 90 people forced to live together in very limited space. LWF partner CAPNI, provides food for the residents. Photo: LWF/ S. Cox

4. Advent: Joy

At two months, baby Mate Talb has just been baptised. A small celebration followed but the joy was short-lived. The next day, the family came home to a sticker on the door of their house informing them simply that they had to leave or be killed. The mother, Snaa Jrgees, scooped the baby up in her arms, put him in the car and the family raced out of Bashid for the safety of the Kurdish governorate in Northern Iraq.

The family now lives in a church community center where some 22 families with altogether 90 people are being cared for by LWF partner CAPNI. All of them had to flee the ISIS aggression. Conditions are inadequate: 11 families sleep in the largest communal room and the remaining 11 in the other two rooms of the center. There is no privacy. Yet the place they now call home is immaculate: bedding is stacked away, the kitchen is spotless, the carpet clean. Warmth comes from gas heaters placed around the house. Children run around, adults sit together talking. Every member of the household does their best to keep the place in order and live harmonically.

Moments of joy are rare. It is little Talb, now six months old, who is greatest source of happiness in the house. The little boy is constantly kissed, cuddled and passed around. "As the youngest, he's the lucky one. Everyone loves him," Jrgees says. "Sometimes I miss him because everyone wants to cuddle him. I never know who might be holding him next."

The small moments of joy found in a baby lighten life for people who have no home to return to and no idea what the future might bring.

Pray this Advent season for the refugees in Northern Iraq. Give thanks for the witness of sharing joy even when faced with darkness around them. Give thanks that we can celebrate this Christmas season, that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it," (John 1). Pray that we may carry this light into the world to the glory of God and the benefit of our neighbor.