Searching for welcome in South Africa | Devastation and hope: On the ground in Syria

A Common Place
A Common Place
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A sign of hope
J RON BYLER, MCC U.S. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right…. (Galatians 6:9)

During the seven-year war in Syria, more than 400,000 people have been killed. Of the pre-war Syrian population of about 22 million, 6.1 million have left their homes for other parts of Syria and 5.2 million are refugees in other countries. Sixty-nine percent of the population of Syria lives in extreme poverty.

For a week in February, I, along with others from MCC, visited our partners in Syria. Amidst the rubble and rocket fire, we found an amazingly resilient people, including these young people you see playing a game with me (on the left) and with Rick Cober Bauman, MCC Canada executive director, on the grounds of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Homs.

Young adults with the Charity Society for Sustainable Development in Damascus are responding to the needs of displaced families and other vulnerable people. In the Qalamoun region, the Islamic Charity of Deir Attieh works with thousands of families affected by war. We met with displaced families who receive food from MCC through the Syrian Orthodox Church in the village of Ayo near Hama. We heard how the food and cash allowances we provide through a Presbyterian church in Homs make a difference.

For seven long years, Christians and others in Syria have continued to share God’s love and compassion with all the people. “You have suffered with us and rejoiced with us,” says the Rev. Ibrahim Nseir of the National Presbyterian Church of Aleppo. “And your presence with us today is a sign of hope that God is not far from us.”

If MCC’s partners in Syria are not growing weary of doing good, how can we? Thank you for your continuing support of MCC’s work in Syria and around the world.

Grace and peace to you,

J RON BYLER’S EMAIL ADDRESS IS RONBYLER@MCC.ORG

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A Common Place

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, shares God’s love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace with justice. MCC is a Christian agency working in collaboration with other Anabaptist organizations to meet the needs of people forced from their homes in the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo by ethnic and political violence. Some 1.4 million people, including 5,000 Mennonites, have fled homes.

Colombia

Serving through soccer

In Colombia, MCC supports more than 20 local church initiatives, helping Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite churches reach out to children and youth in their local communities. In Cali, Sigfredo Godoy, a former professional soccer player and member of Igesia Hermanos Menonitas Luz y Vida (Light and Life Mennonite Brethren Church), started a soccer school, providing hours of quality soccer instruction daily and sharing God’s love with youth from some of the most violent areas of his hometown, Cali. “I’ve always thought that if God gives me a gift or talent, I need to use it to serve,” he says.

DR Congo

Uprooted by conflict

MCC is partnering with the Mennonite Church of Congo, the Mennonite Brethren Church of Congo and other Anabaptist organizations to meet the needs of people forced from their homes in the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo by ethnic and political violence. Some 1.4 million people, including 5,000 Mennonites, have fled homes.

Lend a hand—Relief kits

Relief kits provide needed supplies for a family of four and are given to families whose lives have been disrupted by disaster or crisis.

Contents (NEW Items only)
4 large bars bath soap (leave in wrapper)
1 nail clipper (good quality)
4 large bars laundry soap (such as Fels Naptha, Sunlight or Zote brands) (manufacturer’s packaging)
1 box adhesive bandages (minimum 40, assorted)
4 adult-sized toothbrushes
Sanitary pads (THIN: 1 or 2 packages, minimum 28 pads total)
4 new bath towels (approx. 29 in x 60 in)
Place contents in a box or bag and deliver to an MCC drop-off location. The kit will be repacked in a new 5-gallon plastic pail with lid. Go to mcc.org/kits or call your nearest MCC office (see page 2) to find drop-off locations.

North Korea

MCC canned meat

More than 100,000 pounds of MCC canned meat have been shipped to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea over the past year, providing valuable protein in orphanages and hospitals. In orphanages, the meat is often served as a soup with vegetables, helping to preserve the health of children such as these (names and location not used for security reasons).

Vietnam

New herds

Around the world, MCC helps families earn a better living from land they have available. Through a project of MCC and the U.S.-based Foods Resource Bank, Ha Th Chung in Tan Son District, Vietnam, received training on rabbit care, as well as a herd of five female rabbits and one male. In a few months, her herd quadrupled. A year later, she had 60 rabbits and had sold enough to earn some $500 in additional income.

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Searching for welcome

In South Africa, MCC is supporting refugees who, in turn, support other uprooted people.

STORY BY RACHEL BERGEN
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW SAWATZKY

To many, South Africa sets the standard for development on the continent. It’s home to some of the biggest gold mines in the world. The beautiful Cape of Good Hope and wild Kruger National Park draw tourists from around the world. The human rights-based constitution is lauded globally, a product of visionaries such as Nelson Mandela.

Hundreds of thousands of Africans fleeing poverty and war in their home countries move to South Africa, seeking peace and prosperity.

MCC is responding by supporting partner organizations, often staffed by refugees themselves, who are providing education, child care, job training, support groups and emergency assistance for people striving to make their way in a new country. These projects can mean dramatic change in the lives of people like Pelagie Kutazana.

Kutazana, who fled Rwanda with her brother in 1994 after her parents and all their other siblings were murdered in the genocide, came with her husband to South Africa in 1998 by way of Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique.

She worked as a car guard, one of the worst-paying jobs in the country.

Six days a week from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., she watched over cars, protecting them from thieves for no wage, just tips. It’s often the only job refugees can find because many businesses and organizations won’t hire them.

On a good day, Kutazana could make about $8. Together with her husband, they could put together just enough money for rent and food.

Once she had a son, she hoped to find a safe place she could leave him as she worked.

But she couldn’t afford any of the local child care centers and had no family to watch the baby.

Eventually Kutazana, like other refugee mothers she knew in the city of Durban, would get up early, put on an orange vest and hat, prepare food and reluctantly lock her 9-month-old infant in the apartment while she and her husband went to work.

She constantly worried for the safety of her son.

Then, in 2002, pregnant with her second child and desperate to find child care, Kutazana heard about a group of refugee women who had the same problem and were meeting at a nearby beach, a free gathering place, on Sundays to brainstorm solutions.

The group began meeting after one woman’s daughter fell out of a third-story window while the mother was at work and her children were unsupervised, says Petronella Nzirire Mulume.

The girl wasn’t seriously injured, but it was only a matter of time.

“We said, ‘This is not working for us. We need a safe place to leave our children when we go out to look for jobs,’” recalls Mulume.
For just over a dollar, any refugee woman could become a founding member of the group and the money would go toward hiring a caregiver to watch over the children.

Kutazana jumped at the chance to provide a better alternative for her children and became a member of what’s now known as the Union of Refugee Women, an MCC partner. Her children—who at that time were 2 years old and a month old—became some of the first to receive care.

Today, Children’s Care Centre, with Mulume serving as program manager, is a haven in Durban’s poverty-stricken central business district. The rusty metal gates that protect the entrance of an old factory building are a stark contrast to the inviting, brightly painted murals in the center, which is on the fourth floor of the building. The sounds of children counting and singing drown out the honking of bus drivers on the busy street outside.

About half of the 124 children at the center are from refugee families. Because of the quality of education and affordable cost, South African parents are bringing their children as well.

Kutazana now has six children, and the center has played an important role in the lives of all of them. Her youngest children, a 2-year-old boy and 4-year-old twins, are currently enrolled. “When I put them in the crèche (nursery), I was not worried about them. I knew they were going to eat, they were going to learn, their nappies would be changed. I knew they would be okay,” she says.

Kutazana credits the early learning and care at the center for laying the foundation for her older children’s education. Her eldest son is enrolled in university, her second son is finishing high school, and her third child is in grade one and at the top of his class.

With care for her children, she was able to go back to school for a hospitality diploma. Today, she has a small catering business and sells fruit, vegetables, snack foods, canned goods and dry goods at a shop she owns.

Kutazana, working from behind bars at her shop, knows that no matter how many years she’s been in South Africa, she’s still seen as a foreigner. And she knows that foreigners who have businesses, or even jobs, are at risk in South Africa. Unemployment is at a 14-year high at 36.4 percent and jobless South Africans feel particularly jealous of foreigners who have an income, however meager.

Over the years, waves of violence have been directed toward newcomers. Many shops owned by those who have come to South Africa from other countries have been set on fire or looted in the last decade.

In 2015, Mahatma Gandhi Road, just a block away from the center, was the scene of violent riots. While people set fire to tires around the block, the center, which is seen as a refuge for South African families as well as refugees, was not harmed. But Kutazana couldn’t open her shop for a week because it was so dangerous, and the produce rotted on the shelf.

The danger runs deeper than damage to property.

In 2008, Louis Balekeleyi, who is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was on his way home after a long day of guarding cars. He had made 50 rand, about $4, and was exhausted. He said a few words to someone, trying to keep quiet in case his accent would betray him, when a South African man overheard.

When Balekeleyi stepped out of the bus, he felt a sharp pain in his back and blood dripping down. The man stabbed him once in the back and stole the money he had on him.

“He wanted to kill me,” says Balekeleyi, a father of three who spent the next month in the hospital.

After he recovered, the family moved from the outskirts of Durban into the city, where they felt they’d be safer, but rent skyrocketed.

That’s where Balekeleyi and his wife
Give a gift — Where needed most

Your gift supports MCC’s work where it’s needed most around the world, including helping people uprooted by conflict or disaster. Send contributions in the enclosed envelope, give online at donate.mcc.org or contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2).

MCC partner Refugee Social Services focuses on more than material needs. Support groups, such as this one for older refugees in the city of Durban, provide a space to build connections, to overcome isolation and to spend time with other refugees in similar circumstances. Having space to share stories and laughter together is especially important for older refugees who are unable to work and may have fewer opportunities to connect with others outside their homes.

Ms. Mpoyo Ruth Ngote became connected to Refugee Social Services (RSS), an MCC partner, and received rent and food support for two months, as well as some other assistance.

Today, both are reaching out to others in the French- and Lingala-speaking refugee community in Durban, even as they continue to face discrimination and insults from South Africans.

Through RSS, Balekeleyi, a graduate student, educates newcomers working as car guards at a shopping mall in northwest Durban about HIV and AIDS testing and prevention. Ngote is a part-time community wellness worker.

RSS has many outreaches, from support groups for older refugees to access to social workers who connect refugees with what help is available. But it’s the only organization of its kind in the entire province of KwaZulu-Natal, just over 36,000 square miles, slightly bigger than the state of Iowa.

Balekeleyi and Ngote say they know that if there’s an emergency they can turn to the staff for help and support.

“If it wasn’t for RSS, I don’t know where we’d be,” Balekeleyi says.

Ngote adds a note of caution. “But this country is still very uncertain,” she says, “and we live in fear.”

Rachel Bergen is a writer for MCC Canada. Matthew Sawatzky is a photographer in Winnipeg, Manitoba.
Samson Matabaro

A pastor and founder of an MCC-supported social services organization talks about fleeing to South Africa as a refugee and supporting other refugees.

AS TOLD TO RACHEL BERGEN

I was born in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, in 1965. At the time, the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis was becoming very heated, and my parents were from different ethnic groups. When my mother was pregnant, her family didn’t want her to have me. They wanted her to have a baby with a man from her own ethnic group.

After she gave birth to me, she abandoned me under pressure from her family, and I lived with my father. In 1972, my father was killed by the military because of his ethnicity, so I lived on the street after that. I didn’t enjoy childhood because my life was very hard and I was alone.

Some years later I married, and my wife and I had three children together. After we married and had our children, the military tried to kill me just as they had killed my father.

They shot and wounded me, but I survived. The doctor who treated me contacted the Red Cross to move me to a hospital in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where I would be safer and could recover. I stayed there for a couple of months.

When I returned home, my wife decided she didn’t want to risk being with me. She said, “I don’t want you anymore. Take the children.”

My son Elia was 5 and my daughter Lidia was 3 years old at the time. My youngest daughter, Agatha, was only 1. My arm was still in a cast and I couldn’t carry a baby, so I took the two eldest and left Agatha with my wife.

Over the years, I would keep in touch with Agatha as she grew up in Burundi; today, Agatha, her husband and their child, my first grandchild, live in the same town as I do in South Africa.

In 1993, when I fled Burundi with Elia and Lidia, we spent a few days in a refugee camp in Kigoma, Tanzania. Then, to be safer, we moved to the city of Dar es Salaam.

I felt called to work for God from a young age. I started studying to become a pastor in Burundi and was able to continue in Dar es Salaam. In 1998, as I finished my studies, I started a ministry to unreached people.

At that time, I started helping refugees in Pietermaritzburg through my organization, The Key Ministry International. I would go visit them and pray and encourage them. I tried to help by getting food to people in need. You can’t have peace if you don’t have food. Then, when refugees were having problems opening bank accounts, I helped by advocating for their rights.

In 2008 there was a wave of attacks on foreigners, especially near Durban, just an hour away. There were some attacks near here in Pietermaritzburg.

Refugees came to me, saying they feared South Africans would kill them. I approached the mayor of Pietermaritzburg, local churches, organizations and police, helping them to understand the rights that refugees have and the reasons why people leave their home countries to come to South Africa.

I also pastor a church. It’s called The Key Ministry International Church for Refugees, but everyone is welcome to worship with us.

Because of the challenges I’ve had in my life, I help other refugees and foreigners."

Because of the challenges I’ve had in my life, I help other refugees and foreigners."

Pastor Samson Matabaro is the founder of The Key Ministry International, an MCC partner.
Devastation and hope in Syria

As MCC and its partners meet urgent needs, the cost of war continues to mount.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY EMILY LOEWEN

Driving through Syria, it’s clear the country is still at war. The highways are full of checkpoints, armed soldiers looking inside each vehicle that passes. Out the car window are trucks, cars, buses and tanks, burnt or flipped on their sides. Empty billboards line the highway coming into the country. Military convoys move troops and weaponry: pick-up trucks carry large guns that are manned even in heavy February rain.

In the old city of Damascus, the walls of the Syrian Orthodox Church shake when bombs land nearby. Coverage of the conflict may come and go in the media, but on the ground war is ever present and displacing more people by the day.

The town of Breike in the Qalamoun region has filled with families who’ve been displaced from around the country. In one home live Sami and Amina,* along with their four children and Sami’s mother.

Before the war, their family owned a chain of bakeries in Aleppo and made a good living. But when falling bombs blasted their home with the family inside, Sami and Amina left everything behind. They moved to Breike because they heard it was safe, and because they heard they could receive the monthly food packages MCC is providing.

Each month in the Qalamoun region and in rural areas of Hama and Homs, local organizations such as the Islamic

MCC’s crisis response in Syria

January 2012

Months after the conflict begins, the MCC-supported orphanage on the grounds of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Homs is evacuated and then damaged in fighting. Children are sent to families outside the city and continue to receive support through the church.

February 2012

MCC begins to provide emergency relief in Syria and to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan.

November 2012

As the crisis grows, MCC increases its response, beginning a project to provide food for thousands of displaced families and sending shipments of MCC comforters and kits.

*Real names are not used for security reasons.

From the steps to the fortress near Aleppo’s famed old city, the sight of devastated buildings mixes with more peaceful scenes of daily life. Traffic flows, and people gather to enjoy the beautiful day and historic fortress.
March 2015
MCC facilitates Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resiliency (STAR) training for partners with instructors from Eastern Mennonite University. “I wish every church in Syria could get this training,” says Father Antonio from the Syrian Orthodox Church in Homs.

March 2016
MCC has provided $34.6 million in assistance in Syria and nearby countries, including 218,786 school kits, 140,014 hygiene kits, 30,345 relief kits and food for 126,207 people.

December 2015
MCC’s response includes support for programs that teach peace and support interreligious dialogue. In Aleppo, organizers planned interactive theater performances to depict scenes of conflict and how to resolve those conflicts. They expected to have about 200 audience members, but the three performances drew in some 1,200 people.

January 2017
MCC continues to support trauma healing projects, helping Syrian responders like Dalia Said of Aleppo reach out in their home communities with messages of healing and peace. “God created us all to live together in harmony. He created us to give, to build, to help,” she says.

January 2014
Each winter of the crisis, MCC and its partners have provided families with needed supplies such as blankets, heaters and warm clothes.

October 2013
After opposition forces overtake Haffar and Sadad, MCC, at the request of partners, appeals to the United Nations to make it possible for humanitarian assistance to reach the estimated 3,000 Syrian families endangered there. Assistance did begin to flow, but humanitarian supplies and medical evacuations are still being blocked in some other parts of Syria.

We’re helping those who are in dire need to survive.

Charity of Deir Attieh work with MCC partner Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD) to distribute rice, pasta, chickpeas, lentils, oil, canned meat and other food to 6,000 families. Some have been displaced for years, others have just arrived.

MCC is the only international organization providing relief in some locations in the Qalamoun region. Amid years of trauma, violence and uncertainty, the food can be a lifeline.

MCC continues to provide tuition for displaced students and support efforts to provide food, cash allowances, health training and other assistance to people uprooted by war.

The building of Nseir’s church was destroyed in 2012. Yet through the siege church members continued to
The congregation has continued to meet to worship and to reach out to the community around them. Today, Nseir’s congregation continues to distribute monthly cash allowances and shipments of blankets, hygiene kits and warm clothes from MCC coordinators for MCC.

Emily Loewen is digital content coordinator for MCC.

Learn more at washington.mcc.org/Syria-Iraq.
MCC representatives

**Names:** Bruce Buckwalter and Rose Shenk

**Hometown:** Harrisonburg, Virginia (Community Mennonite Church)

**Assignment:** As representatives for MCC's work in Ethiopia, we supervise a talented group of Ethiopian staff. We also work alongside 14 partner organizations that implement projects in food security, education, health and emergency relief.

**Typical day:** Answering emails, monitoring projects and editing MCC’s database of information alongside staff members. Our house and office are on the same compound, and we enjoy morning tea and lunch with staff each working day. At least once a month, we travel to project sites to visit partners and meet with project participants.

**On serving:** We both firmly believe that as Christians we should love our neighbors as ourselves. This motivates us to do what we can to serve those around us.

**Joys:** Ethiopia is a large, diverse country in terms of the people, the terrain and the culture, and MCC has projects in almost every region. We love seeing the good work that MCC is supporting.

**Challenges:** Communication, including slow, intermittent internet, and a complicated and bureaucratic working environment.

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**Find your place**

MCC has workers in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as in Canada and the U.S.

Go to mcc.org/serve, contact your nearest MCC office or follow @servemcc on Twitter to learn about current service opportunities.

MCC workers are expected to exhibit a commitment to Christian faith, active church membership and biblical peacemaking.

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**On assignment**

Rose Shenk and her husband Bruce Buckwalter visit a water project of MCC and partner Afro-Ethiopia Integrated Development with three of their four sons, Daniel (next to Rose), Andrew and Jacob Stoltzfus.

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**Rose Shenk**

“We feel that it is a privilege to be working for the kingdom of God in this part of the world.”

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**Sawubona**

(Say “sa-woo-BOH-nah”)

My name is Joshua Osenge

**Age:** 10

**Lives in:** Durban, South Africa

I was born in South Africa. But we speak Swahili at home because my parents are from the Democratic Republic of the Congo; sometimes I want to go there when the war is over. It feels like we’re far away from home, but my family had to start a new life here because there was war.

I’m in grade five. When I wake up in the morning I take a bath, brush my teeth, put my green school uniform on and eat breakfast while my dad watches the news. Then he drives me 20 minutes to school.

I study English, math, social science, Zulu, natural science, technology and music. After school I come to the Children’s Care Centre (which MCC helps support), draw pictures and eat some food. I came here when I was younger too. When I’m not in school, I like to visit my friends and cousins, watch TV, study and play soccer.

**My favorite food:** barbecued meat with cornmeal porridge (brai/meat and pap)

**My favorite subject:** math

**What I want to be:** a soccer player

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**SAY WHAT?**

South Africa has 11 official languages, a way of recognizing the many tribal groups in South Africa along with the two previous official languages of English and Afrikaans. What do you think it would be like to have 11 official languages? Often, people do speak more than one language, but not all 11. Zulu, which Joshua is learning in school, is one of the most widely spoken languages.

**Can you write “hello” in another language?**

___________________________ (language: ____________ )

___________________________ (language: ____________ )

___________________________ (language: ____________ )
The A to Z of MCC relief sales

A: apples
B: baskets
C: corn hole
D: donations for My Coins Count
E: Easter eggs
F: farmer sausage
G: gathering
H: houseplants
I: Indonesian food
J: jars of honey and jam
K: kids’ activities
L: learning
M: music
N: noodles
O: oranges
P: pancakes
Q: quilt auctions
R: Run for Relief
S: strawberry pies
T: tractors
U: used books
V: volunteers
W: whoopie pies
X: xylophone music
Y: yarn crafts
Z: zwieback