As the costs of COVID-19 began to mount across the globe, Syrians were already grappling with a multi-layered crisis. Families had lost houses, businesses, savings and belongings over years of armed conflict. Many had fled home, some forced to relocate more than once. Food prices had soared— as much as seven times higher than before the conflict, according to one 2019 estimate.

Then, 2020 brought not only the looming health and economic costs of COVID-19, but also more than 2,400 wildfires,
engulfing thousands of acres of agricultural and forest land across northwestern Syria. More than 2 million fruit trees, most of them olive trees, were lost.

For more than a decade, MCC supplies have met urgent needs and offered a message of caring for Syrian families. In November 2020, MCC canned chicken was an especially welcome gift. “We couldn’t buy chicken for a whole year, and eating it has become a dream for me, my husband and our children,” one mother in Homs said to staff of MCC’s partner Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC).

Families, whose names aren’t used for security reasons, struggle daily. Some lost olive trees in the recent fires. Others have little safety net left after years of war and are grappling to make ends meet, a task more urgent as food prices rise.

Since 1946, volunteers have gathered to can meat that MCC sends to hungry people across the globe. As the 2020-2021 canning season approached, John Hillegass, then-MCC canning coordinator, and others active in MCC meat canning faced unprecedented challenges. Due to COVID-19, would meat be available? Could volunteers gather, even if they spread out and worked at a distance from each other?

Some canning sites didn’t have room to space out volunteers. Some who did—the Cumberland Valley Relief Center in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and the MCC Central States Material Resources Center in North Newton, Kansas—hosted three weeks of canning each. Volunteers traveled from surrounding communities and sometimes surrounding states.

In Chambersburg, before it was clear that canning could happen, local churches were making donations, said Diane Brockman, director of the Cumberland Valley Relief Center. Knowing that their facility had space to spread volunteers, canning committee members moved forward despite uncertainties.

“The final response from everybody was, ‘We will do whatever we can to can meat this year. People need the meat. We’re doing it in the name of Christ,’” she said.

The 2020-2021 canning season yielded some 320,000 cans, or 480,000 pounds, of meat. It’s about half of the total of a normal year. Given the restrictions, Hillegass was delighted.

“It really exemplifies coming together. Together we can,” Hillegass said, echoing a canning slogan embraced by volunteers and canners. “We were making decisions at the last minute. It really took everybody having a lot of grace and understanding. Not just the volunteers. But the meat suppliers, the can suppliers.”

The effort continues to meet urgent needs. In Tartous, a city on the coast of Syria, a father of six told how his family fled from rocket fire in Aleppo. Uprooted from home, he struggled to earn enough to support his family and eventually took two daughters out of school so they could work.

“Our goal is to get bread, basic materials and some beans,” he said, “but regarding meat or chicken and fish, my children forgot their taste a long time ago, and they became pictures that they only see on restaurant signs.”

His eyes filled with tears as he met with FMEEC staff.

“Thank you from the depth of the heart for giving us the cans of cooked chicken,” he said. “We have been able to cook them in many ways, you have brought joy to the hearts of children. ... Look at them, how happy they are!”

Adapted from “Canning meat for the world,” A Common Place, Fall 2021.