Uprooted in Iraq | A call to welcome and caring: How MCC is reaching out to refugees and migrants
How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? (Psalm 13:1)

In recent months, I visited MCC’s programs in Palestine and Israel, Bosnia and Ukraine, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. There are so many refugees and displaced people in so many places. It is difficult not to echo the cry of the Psalmist. When, Lord, will you hear your children crying?

And then in my own country I see some respond with hate and fear to the idea of refugees coming to the U.S. We are not only a part of God’s solution, God’s love, for a needy world, but we can be part of the problem as well.

Through MCC you can be a part of showing God’s love to a hurting world by sharing with refugees and displaced people. Lebanon’s man told me that his life has been transformed, having a large restaurant in Syria, left all they owned because they wanted their children to be safe.

Much of MCC’s work with uprooted people is helping them stay in their home countries and regions, but we can also help them become U.S. residents and citizens by supporting legal assistance provided through MCC’s national program and regional offices. And we can speak out for fairer, more just immigration laws in our own country through the channels provided by our Washington Office.

Through MCC, we can help ensure that God’s children are not forgotten forever. In the face of fear, scarcity, violence and hatred, we can share peace and justice. Through MCC you can be a part of showing God’s love to a hurting world around the world.

Cover story
4 Uprooted in Iraq

As Iraqis displaced by violence settle in unfinished homes and buildings, MCC is helping to meet urgent needs.

First person

Fawzia shares about being displaced in Iraq, sheltering uprooted families today and raising bees.

Features
12 A call to welcome and caring
Learn more about how MCC and its partners are following God’s call to love and welcome some of the millions forced from home around the world.

Departments
3 MCC news
18 On assignment
31 Serving and Learning Together

MCC 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 and justice. MCC envisions communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation.

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Uprooted in Iraq

As Iraqis flee violence, leaving homes and lives they have worked for years to build, MCC is responding alongside the generosity of neighbors and local communities.

STORY BY MARLA PIERSON LESTER
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW SAWATZKY

In an unfinished home shared by 10 families, the damp and chill of rain seeps through concrete blocks as 46-year-old Khider* sits cross-legged, recalling the dividing line that runs through his life—the early morning hours in August 2014 when the Islamic State group came into his village in Iraq’s Sinjar region and began killing.

“We left everything,” he says, describing how his family and others fled in the dark. Thinking they’d be gone at most a day or two, they took little, just themselves and the clothes they were wearing.

Over a year later, still in an unfinished shell of a building that looks more like the construction sites Khider used to work on than a home, a story from Khider’s family history seems close at hand. In 1915 his family and other Yazidis, a religious minority, fled from persecution in what is now Turkey, saving their lives by putting “house and home on one donkey.”

But from the time Khider finished electrical studies in Mosul in his 20s, his life was shaped by a different narrative—a growing career and hard work, graduating from small electrical jobs to larger and larger commercial work, stocking a shop with increasingly complex equipment to sell or rent. “My job became better and better by the day,” he recalls.

He could provide his wife and six children with whatever meat they wanted to eat—tender lamb, not bargain chicken. When his daughter started a sewing business, he bought the first machine; soon she had earnings for a more professional one.

On a chilly morning in November 2015, Khider points to the damp floor, the makeshift kitchen shared by several families.

“This is the 21st century. And see how we’re living.”

Like others from his village, he’s haunted by thoughts of the young Yazidi women who were captured and likely abused or sold in marketplaces, and of the older people who decided to stay behind and haven’t been heard from since. He’s haunted by the uncertainty of the future.

“Now, everything is lamentable,” he says.
says. “We were living an abundant life. We didn’t need any-
thing. But now we need everything.”

More than 3 million Iraqis have fled their homes since 2014. Many like Khider’s family are finding shelter in unfin-
ished buildings and trying to figure how to meet their most urgent needs. They come alongside thousands of others who fled earlier waves of violence—from Mosul in 2004, Baghdad in 2006 or other areas throughout the 2000s.

MCC is responding—providing humanitarian assistance for food and shelter; supplying urgently needed winter items such as kerosene heaters, fuel, blankets and winter clothing; meeting other needs through MCC hygiene kits, infant care kits and cash; and strengthening communities by training and empowering youth to share and document the stories of trauma and resilience that are part of being displaced.

Khider’s is one of more than 750 families in northern Nineawa governorate receiving monthly food assistance through MCC partner Zakho Small Villages Project (ZSVP), an effort funded through MCC’s account at Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

Each month, families receive rice, wheat flour, lentils, chickpeas, bulgur wheat, oil, tomato paste, sugar, salt, tea and hygiene items. “The rice is the most important thing. We use it daily,” says Hamo, another recipient. “If it was not for your ration, believe me, we would suffer a lot,” adds Khudeda, Hamo’s neighbor.

And the food helps slow the downward spiral of loss that happens as families leave home.

After Khider fled, for instance, he sold the only asset he could bring with him, a car. Food support helps him pre-
serve what little savings he has left, knowing he’ll need it for other urgent needs.

Work has been scarce, so earnings only gradually catch up to meet the family’s basic needs. It’s hard for Khider to contemplate that, knowing he now has only a small percentage of what he used to earn and own. “How do
We compensate for what we lost?”, he asks. It’s not only money or things. Sometimes the ties of family can fray under the strain. 

Two years after her husband died in a car accident, Fatima, a mother of six, watched violence begin to overtake her city, Fallujah, in December 2013. Her plan was to remain with her nearby in-laws. By Iraqi custom Fatima would rely on them after her husband’s death. But then her in-laws did not have enough room in their car to evacuate her and her children. They told her to go back to her family in Baghdad.

Fatima moved the family into her widowed sister’s small home. That didn’t work out. Neither did living with her mother. “I have six children, and it’s not easy for me to leave a house,” she says. “Whenever we go to a new place, it’s a new feeling and a new fear. Maybe we can’t stay.”

It was time for her to be on her own. “I thought, if my mother can’t tolerate me, nobody will tolerate me,” she recalls. She left her two oldest children to study in various schools and to live with her nearby in-laws. By Iraqi custom families are expected to still provide for a sister’s small home. That didn’t work either, so Fatima moved the family into her widowed sister’s large home. “I have my own independent home. This is very good,” she says.

As MCC’s work helps build a safety net, it comes alongside the generosity of Iraqis reaching out to newcomers in their communities. Khider tells of a local rug merchant in Ninewa governorate who donated his entire stock of rugs to a refugee family, “the family in need is a part of my family,” he says. It’s not only money or things. Sometimes it’s the ties of family that can fray under the strain.

In 2015, a project of MCC and Iraqi organization Rehabilitation, Education and Community Health (REACH), funded through a grant from the Canadian government, provided six months of rent assistance to help Fatima and her children, including Abdul, 8, and Shams, 8, move out of a leaky, unfinished building and into this apartment in Erbil governorate.

An MCC-supported project provided rent assistance to help Fatima and her children, including Abdul, 8, and Shams, 8, move out of a leaky, unfinished building and into this apartment in Erbil governorate.
moved with my family for the first time when I was 4 or 5 years old. We are Yazidi (an ethnic and religious minority in Iraq) and because of this, neighbors were making problems for my parents—breaking into our home and taking things.

We left by donkey and settled in another village in northern Ninewa governate. I grew up there.

There, we had chickens, sheep, an artesian well. We grew wheat, barley, lentils and chickpeas. In the summer we’d cultivate watermelon. I remember the winters we’d warm ourselves by burning hay on the stove.

We left by walking. We were able to take our sheep and chickens.

Each family had about eight members. We were seven with my mother and siblings before me and two after. My father had died earlier.

In the new place we didn’t have enough room for the people in our family. We sold the animals.

At the beginning, life was hard. I worked with my family cutting clay for bricks for construction. My mother was making clay ovens to sell and doing other jobs. Among my sisters and brothers, we had a soldier and a teacher and farmers. I spent only two years there. In 1977, I got married and moved to a different village. My husband and I had two children—a boy and a girl. Then my husband died in 1982 from kidney problems. He was 29 years old.

Today, I am alone. My daughter lives in a nearby village.

My son went to Germany in 2014, after the Islamic State group came. His friends were telling him, “Let’s go, let’s go.” He didn’t have a job, so he went. A lot of friends went together. He is waiting in Germany for asylum.

Now I have two families living with me—25 people in all. They left their village when the Islamic State group came in August 2014. We knew them before. We would visit them when we went to their village. One of the men was a leader in the village and was wealthy, but now he has nothing. They had to leave behind their land, their animals. It’s a very hard life. They have no place to go. Where would they go if I don’t accept them?

When I heard from Zakho Small Villages Project (ZSVP) that I could take part in a project to raise bees or start a kitchen garden, I chose the bees. In our village, my parents had beehives.

I’ve benefited a lot from this project. Every day I work with the bees. I put reeds up to shade the hives during the summer and a nylon cover to keep them warm during winter. During the winter when there are no flowers, I boil sugar and water for them, checking to make sure their dishes remain filled.

Sometimes as many as 40 bees will sting me. I received five bee boxes in February 2015. Now, I have 16 bee boxes. When I divided my hives, I gave two back to ZSVP to give to other families. I also gave eight to other farmers directly. Now, if I want more beehives, I can divide my hives to make more hives. Or I can make more honey to sell.

We depend for our livelihoods on the money that comes from this honey. Beekeeping is good for me. Because of the income generation, I look after it day and night.

I’ve received many bee boxes in the last few years. I’ve benefited a lot from this project. I divide my hives to make more hives. Or I can make more honey to sell.

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A call to welcome and caring

At home and around the world, MCC and its partners are welcoming newcomers. We invite you to reflect on how you can join in God’s call to love and welcome some of the millions forced from home around the world.

“You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”
(Deuteronomy 10:19)

I am so happy to get additional food

When families are far from the support systems of home, the most urgent needs are often the basics — enough to eat, enough nutrition so children can grow.

In a refugee camp in Gambella, Ethiopia, MCC canned meat provided through International Medical Corps brought needed protein and nutrients for children 2 years and younger and for pregnant and lactating mothers.

“I am so happy to get additional food for my child,” says 19-year-old Nyachot Gaktek, who fled from South Sudan and is shown with her 6-month-old daughter Nyagoa. “My big worry these days is that my children are not getting enough to eat and so not growing well.”

“You are my family”

When Brian Darweesh and Reem Younes got married, they were living as refugees in Lebanon. They left their homes in Syria fleeing violence and a threat on Darweesh’s life. At their wedding there was no white dress and no party. Just a civil ceremony in a foreign country.

But then a little over a year later the couple had another wedding ceremony, this time in Winnipeg, Man. Though most of their family and friends were a world away, the church was still full.

People from Douglas Mennonite Church and Jubilee Mennonite Church, their new family and friends, gathered to support them. The congregations sponsored the couple as refugees through MCC Canada’s private sponsorship agreement with the government. Douglas Mennonite also sponsored Brian’s sister Maysoun Darweesh, along with her husband and two daughters, who arrived in 2012.

That family has become a part of the church community. They’re in a small group, have friends in the congregation and Maysoun is a member of the church. “We didn’t feel lonely,” she says. “My family is very far away, but I have a family here.”

When it became clear her brother and his wife needed refugee status too, the church decided to help.

The congregation has always been supportive of sponsorship, says Heidi Reimer, who’s on the resettlement committee, especially because many of them or their family members were refugees themselves. “We do it because we love people and we feel that this is what God calls us to do: to reach out, to welcome the stranger, to be hospitable, to share what we have,” she says.

Many people from the church and community took part in the wedding. Some tailored clothing or helped Maysoun make a traditional Syrian dessert. Much of the food was donated.

It’s clear that Darweesh and Younes are becoming part of the community, just like Maysoun and her family. As Younes said to everyone at the reception, “even if my family is not here, really you are my family.”

Withstanding winter’s chill

As Syrians have fled to new cities or villages, they’ve settled where they can — often in abandoned or unfinished buildings with little heating.

For the last three winters, MCC has supported projects in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria to reach out to those displaced by unrest in Syria and in Iraq with items like winter clothing, heaters, fuel and blankets. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Syrian refugees Asad, 12, and Hassan, 10, whose last names aren’t used because of security concerns, help their families carry winter clothes home from an MCC-funded distribution.

Many families were able to carry little with them as they fled home, and the conflict has lasted long enough that children are outgrowing or wearing out whatever winter clothes their families could bring.
Talking peace in the midst of war

In the wartorn city of Aleppo, Syria, with airstrikes, suicide bombs and fighting making headlines, an MCC-supported project created a stir of a different sort.

An interactive theater—part of a peace project supported through a grant from the Canadian government—was planned to give 200 people or so the chance to see dramas about conflict and, through audience conversations, offer their own ideas and solutions.

Instead, some 1,200 people attended the three shows put on through the project in December 2015, success that was especially poignant in a city where government approval has to be given for any public gathering. A TV interview on Syria’s largest national television station spread the message of peace more broadly.

To open and promote dialogue about accepting others, presenters take different roles in stories—for instance, the story of a couple from different backgrounds who want to marry, or a meeting of two religious leaders from different traditions. As the conflict heightens, presenters stop and ask audience members for suggestions, then incorporate those who answer into acting out the solution. Audience members have a chance to share from their own experiences.

Finding work without leaving home

MCC’s migration work isn’t just about helping people who are uprooted. Around the world, MCC is helping families and individuals figure out ways to support themselves without having to migrate.

Through an MCC-funded project in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, young people who have been returned back to Honduras after attempting to migrate are studying at Central American Polytechnic Institute, laying the foundation to work and build a more secure future at home.

“I know that with this training I can earn enough to send my daughters to school. That is what I have been praying and asking God for,” says Kenia Garcia, right, shown with fellow students Edgar Tinoco, middle, and Josbel Perdomo. “To return to my studies hasn’t been easy, but God has given me the strength to finish with success and to continue in the path of my dreams.”

Legal assistance in the U.S.

For newcomers to the U.S., a pressing need is finding help to navigate the complex legal process of applying to become residents and citizens, stresses Saulo Padilla, immigration education coordinator for MCC U.S.

The U.S. has more than 22 million foreign-born, noncitizens—and only 12,000 private immigration attorneys and 2,800 nonprofit immigration attorneys and accredited staff. “The need for well-trained, trustworthy and honest legal services is urgent,” Padilla says.

For the past 14 years, MCC U.S. has been providing 40-hour immigration law trainings, building capacity for volunteers and nonprofit and church-based staff members to take their first steps toward a rigorous accreditation process that enables them to work directly with immigrants.

For graduates such as Mara Weaver, the training provides an intense, broad-based introduction to immigration law. As a paralegal at the Goshen, Ind., office of the National Immigrant Justice Center, Weaver continues to build on those principles.

“It gave me hooks to hang my knowledge on once I started this work,” says Weaver, who learned of the MCC training and became inspired to do this work while in Mexico through MCC’s Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program.

And the impact of the training multiplies as each graduate works with clients. “I have around 75 open cases I’m working on right now,” Weaver says, explaining that as cases close others will open.
Minnesota...to a new country
Imagine being deported to a country you have never visited, where you don’t speak the language and may know little of the customs. That’s what happened to 26-year-old Chhaiya Chhamm. Technically a citizen of Cambodia, Chhamm was born in a Thai refugee camp after his mother fled from the Khmer Rouge. Sponsored by a U.S. church, Chhamm and his family moved to Denver, Colorado, in the early 1990s. He considered the U.S. his home. But as a teenager, he was charged with driving under the influence of alcohol and evading arrest. After spending three years behind bars and another three on probation, he was deported to Cambodia. A U.S. law allows noncitizens to be expelled if they commit a felony, three misdemeanors or any crime for which the sentence is more than one year in prison. There are more than 500 returnees in Cambodia, according to the Returnee Integration Support Centre (RISC) in Phnom Penh, and that number is growing. MCC supports the work of RSC to help returnees find their way in Cambodia. The center provides country orientation, temporary housing, food stipends, help to acquire the necessary paperwork for government-issued identification and educational grants so returnees can go back to school and start a career in Cambodia. Some go on to work in the trades or in the private sector, but the great majority work as English teachers. Chhamm, right, shown with RSC co-director Villa Kem, started work as a security guard at a nearby club recently and wants to teach English, too. “I just hope to be successful here, that I can pick up this language, and learn how to communicate with people here,” he says.

Dangers of displacement
“Did I escape from the violence in my home country only to suffer another kind of violence here?” a Colombian refugee wondered to David Sulewski, an MCC worker in a refugee project in Ecuador. When people flee from home to new cities or communities, they are isolated from the routines and protections of their communities and face new dangers—often including violence. “We encounter many refugees who have suffered from sexual violence not only when they were persecuted and compelled to flee Colombia, but also during their flight across the border into Ecuador where they continue to face the risk of sexual- and gender-based violence,” notes Sulewski. Sulewski and his wife Tibrine da Fonseca, of Boston, Mass., work in an Ecuadorian Mennonite project to reach out to refugees in Quito. In December 2015, MCC and other organizations joined to sponsor a Colombian women’s group that is working actively against violence to come to Quito, Ecuador, to share their experiences with project participants. “It is impossible to forget what has happened to us,” one of the presenters told the group, “but the fear with which we live unites us as women and compels us to continue our struggle…”

MCC at work: Migration and uprooted people
MCC reaches out to refugees and displaced people in times of crisis, supports newcomers over time and helps people find ways to support themselves without having to migrate. Some key current focuses include:

- **Canada:** Welcoming newcomers by helping groups that sponsor refugees as they complete applications, prepare for arrival and support families once they’re in Canada.
- **Europe:** Providing more than $2 million of assistance to displaced people in Ukraine, including through shipments of MCC comforters and other items.
- **U.S.:** Supplying legal assistance and immigration law trainings, offering opportunities to advocate for just immigration policies.
- **Middle East:** Meeting urgent needs of people uprooted from home by conflict in areas such as Iraq, Syria and Palestine and Israel.
- **Latin America:** Working with refugees from Colombia, giving Central Americans alternatives to migration, accompanying migrants through Mexico, meeting needs of Haitians deported from the Dominican Republic.
- **Africa:** Meeting needs of refugees in Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda and reaching out to displaced people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and South Sudan.
- **Asia:** Addressing economic migration in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal and other countries through agricultural and job training programs helping people earn a living without leaving home.

An invitation to reflect
“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor …”
Deuteronomy 26:5

Food shortage, environmental disaster, climate change, poverty and conflict push people to move. Land, resources, jobs, family, health and education pull people to move. People move voluntarily, a choice made after weighing the pros and cons. People move involuntarily, forced by violence, human trafficking, ethnic cleansing. In the Bible, the people of God were called to remember their story of migration. That remembering led to a call to safeguard the well-being of the widows, the orphans and foreigners among them (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Remember migration stories from your own life, your family history, migrants you have met
Consider the impact of migration
- on families
- on communities of origin and destination
- on levels of poverty and violence

Respond
What do these stories say?
How should Christians respond to migration?
How can we respond to the call to safeguard the well-being of people on the move?

This exercise is from People on the Move, an MCC migration exhibit that is available for loan by churches, conferences and other groups. To learn more or reserve the exhibit, email exhibits@mcc.org, or contact MCC U.S. at 888.563-4676.

Speaking to government
Governments can extend assistance—or create obstacles—for people on the move both here in the U.S. and in other countries.

The MCC U.S. Washington Office offers resources you can use to advocate to lawmakers for U.S. policies in line with Christ’s call to care for the stranger. Learn more at washingtontememo.org/immig.

Also, on May 22-23, U.S. congregations and individuals are invited to take part in Days of Prayer and Action for Peace in Colombia focusing on “Building peace from the ground up.” Your church can plan a time of worship in solidarity with uprooted people in Colombia and take action, encouraging peace with justice for all Colombians. Learn more at washingtontememo.org/latin-america.
Serving and Learning Together

Name: Kara Hee-won Shin

Hometown: Vancouver, British Columbia (Jungdaun Korean Church)

Assignment: Through MCC's Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program, I serve with MCC partner Daima Initiatives for Peace and Development in Nairobi, Kenya.

Why I chose SALT: Last year, in my position as a policy research fellow, I realized that I was being lured to chase roads that promised comfort and familiarity, rather than personal and spiritual challenges and growth. I wanted to break out of this pattern and also complicate my understanding of the world and how to approach its issues.

Typical day: My days are split among various peacebuilding projects across Kenya. One is a trauma and resilience initiative that works with students who survived an April 2015 attack on Moi Garissa University College that killed nearly 150 students. As I meet with survivors and document their stories, I have been astonished by their resilience. I also am stunned by how deeply the students root themselves in what was not uprooted from them during the attack— their trust in God.

Joys: Inspiring leadership, witnessing how peace workers in Kenya tirelessly and creatively work in a context of historical and current violence. My tasks, though challenging at times, have stretched my understanding of the residual effects of terrorism, radicalization, unaddressed trauma, colonialism and conflict. I am grateful for this opportunity to face and in a small way address these complex and prevalent issues.

Explore SALT

Through MCC's Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program, young adults from Canada and the U.S. are immersed in another culture for a year as they serve in fields such as education, agriculture, peacebuilding and more. Know young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 who might be interested? Send them to mcc.org/salt to learn more.

Other opportunities

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

My name is Shams.

Age: 8

Lives in: Kurdistan Region, Iraq

I am from the city of Fallujah but because of fighting my family moved here. (MCC helped her family move into an apartment. Before, they lived in a tent in a building that was under construction and had no walls but only concrete floors, ceilings and pillars.)

I live with my mother, a sister and two brothers. I like cooking, especially making dough for pizza and cutting vegetables for salad.

I take a bus to a school for children who have come here from other places. We have classes for boys and classes for girls. There are 30 girls in my third-grade class.

My 5-year-old brother and I like to build houses out of blocks. We also make houses out of sheets and the pillows. He has his house and I have my house and we visit each other. Sometimes I bring a glass of water but I pretend that it’s tea. Sometimes I dress up in my mother’s clothes and head scarf.

I want to build houses someday. The house I build should be beautiful. I would put a library in my house, a bed, a beautiful kitchen and toys. It would be full of toys.

My favorite food: pizza

My favorite subject: English

What I want to be: engineer

What would you take? If you and your family had to leave home with only what you could carry, what would you take?

1. 

2. 

3.
The plaid shirt you might find on an MCC thrift shop rack catches your eye for a reason – it wants to help people keep bees in Iraq. Put the money down. Let it follow its dream.

Those cool kicks that somehow never leave your closet long to help farmers in Chad grow healthy goats. Time to let go. Donate them to an MCC thrift shop, please.

Your sister wants a new mixing bowl. The bowl you spot on an MCC thrift shop shelf wants to provide food and supplies to earthquake survivors in Nepal. Give the gift that gives twice.