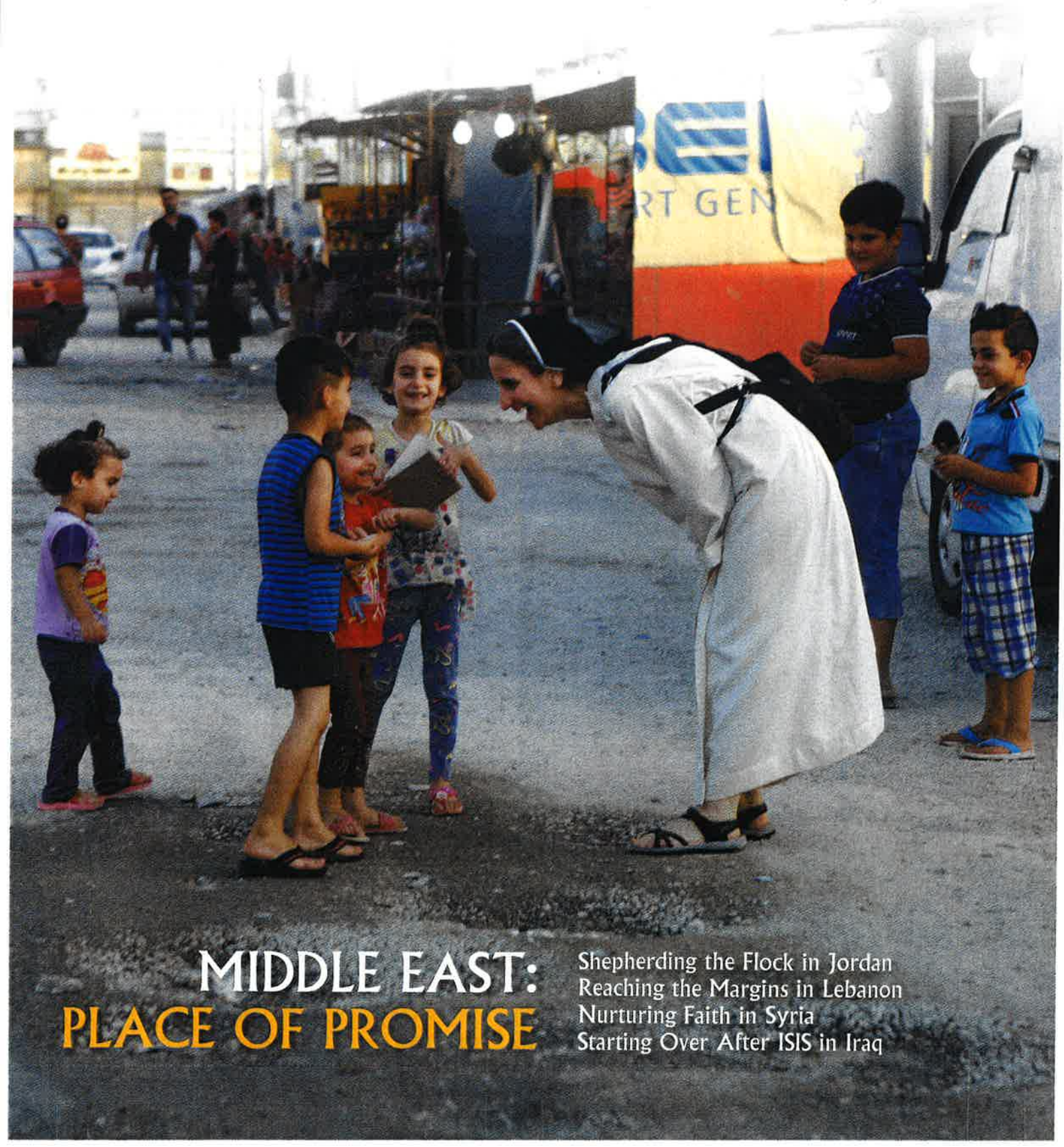
one

September 2017

God • World • Human Family • Church



MIDDLE EAST: PLACE OF PROMISE

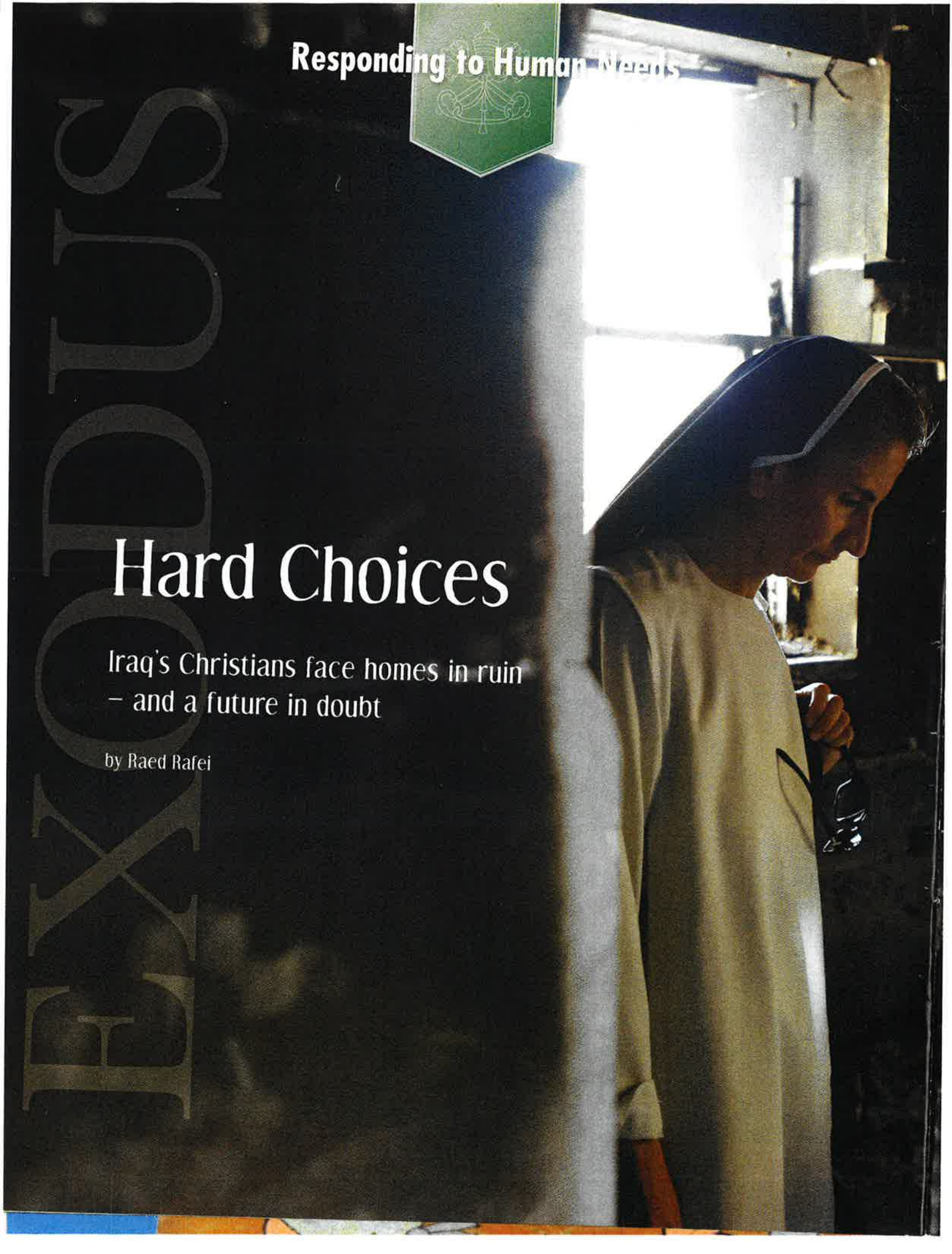
Shepherding the Flock in Jordan
Reaching the Margins in Lebanon
Nurturing Faith in Syria
Starting Over After ISIS in Iraq

EXODUS

Hard Choices

Iraq's Christians face homes in ruin – and a future in doubt

by Raed Rafei



In a bright classroom, a dozen spirited teenagers, in groups of two or three, pore over Arabic copies of the Bible. The unadorned, freshly painted walls hint that the room has not seen use for a while.

"Who knows what Urshalim means?" asks a sister, using the name for Jerusalem preferred by Arabic-speaking Christians, as she circles around her students reading from the Acts of the Apostles. A short moment of silence follows, interrupted by an eager young voice: "The land of peace!"

It might seem like a normal scorching-hot day at Immaculate Conception School in Qaraqosh, once a thriving Christian city in northern Iraq. But the hustle and bustle of cheerful children playing in the courtyard of this summer catechetical program strongly contrasts with the ghostly silence outside.

The scenes around town speak volumes. Large piles of rubble lie interwoven with twisted iron along rough roads. Long, empty streets showcase buildings collapsed or scorched, and church towers brought to ruin.

In October 2016, after more than two years of occupation by ISIS, Qaraqosh and other predominantly Christian towns in the Nineveh Plain of northern Iraq were liberated by a large military campaign led by the Iraqi military, Kurdish Peshmerga and Shiite militias, with support from international forces.

Over the ensuing months, however, displaced Iraqi Christians have been hesitant to return home, citing uncertainty about reconstruction, political instability, security concerns and general anxieties over their forced exodus from their homeland.

But in this town that has stood for thousands of years — it was once called Baghdeda in ancient Syriac — and which only three years ago boasted large entertainment centers, wedding halls and numerous shopping areas, signs of life are slowly and gradually emerging.

"It's like a flower becoming bigger and bigger every day," says the Rev. Georges Jahola of the Syriac Catholic Church, who has been heading the church's efforts for the reconstruction of Qaraqosh in the absence of an effective governmental plan.

"In the beginning people were afraid to return," he says optimistically, "but the situation is changing. One family brings another."

Iraq's largest Christian city, Qaraqosh served as a commercial hub for the entire region of the Nineveh Plain. Since the landmines were cleared and the area was declared safe in April, some 500 families have returned — a fraction of the pre-war population of 50,000.

Yet the simple fact that they are here tells a story of resilience, determination and faith.

Sister Luma Khudher reflects near the stoup of the damaged Church of Sts. Behnam and Sarah in Qaraqosh.

In a once-bustling commercial neighborhood known simply as Al Souk (Arabic for "market"), locals have begun the mammoth task of clearing away rubble. With a shovel in hand and a black hat, Bahnam Matti, 72, removes detritus from what had been a clothes shop, now desolate with large holes in the ceiling. Every now and then, he pauses to wipe the sweat off his face with a pink towel placed on his shoulder.

Across the street, a woman in a bright red and blue dress sprays water from a hose on the entrance of her scorched restaurant. Others paint walls or cut wood panels, undaunted by the scale of destruction — scores of collapsed rooftops, smashed storefronts and hills of accumulated debris.

Electricity and running water have returned, albeit sporadically. And the number of small shops purveying basic foodstuffs and household items continues to grow.

"People are asking themselves, 'What does it mean to be an Iraqi Christian?'"

A local school reports another promising sign: the steady daily arrival of parents asking to register their children in an ongoing program.

Dressed in pants dotted with fresh paint, Gilbert Georgis brings his daughters Klarina, 10, and Klarissa, 12, to join the 270 students attending various classes — including art lessons, religious education and other recreational activities designed to help children process the trauma they have experienced.

"This is our land. We are not afraid," says Mr. Georgis. A teacher who currently performs odd jobs around town as a handyman, he says he carefully planned his family's return last week with his wife and four children.

"It's better to live in a room here than to be in a house somewhere else," he says.

With their home only sustaining minimal damage, the family preferred to return rather than pay $400 a month for a two-bedroom apartment in Ain Kawa — a suburb of Erbil, in nearby autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, where thousands of Christians have sought refuge since ISIS flushed them from their homes in August 2014.

Not everybody is as fortunate as Mr. Georgis. A recent comprehensive survey carried out by church

▲ Bahnam Matti removes rubble from a former clothing store.

◀ Slewa Shamoon Aba displays a broken crucifix in the garden of his home.

authorities indicates that of the 6,826 housing units in Qaraqosh, about a third are severely damaged or burned, with some two-thirds sustaining partial damage. Almost 100 homes are completely destroyed and beyond repair.

Despite some shy rebuilding efforts by churches and homeowners, the estimated $70 million needed for the overall reconstruction of Qaraqosh still looms large. According to Father Jahola, several organizations have pledged to help with large finances, but substantial aid has not materialized yet.

The condition of Qaraqosh is not very different from that of most Christian towns in the Nineveh Plain, which typically report damage to 30 to 40 percent of structures — houses, schools, public institutions, churches, monasteries and hospitals alike. But some towns, such as Batnaya, have been rendered completely uninhabitable, reporting 85 percent of buildings demolished under heavy aerial bombardment.

The total cost for the reconstruction of the Nineveh Plain, estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars — if not billions — will require a significant mobilization of aid by foreign governments and international charities.

In September, local authorities hope more Christian families will leave their temporary makeshift housing in trailer camps in the Kurdish area and return to Qaraqosh and other Christian towns, continuing or even accelerating the area's restoration. Yet maintaining this momentum will depend in part upon a decision by the Iraqi central government to resume administration of schools and other public services in Nineveh. Such a decision, it is believed, would also speed the restoration of other vital infrastructure.

But for the time being, residents tend to what they can — the physical condition of the towns, and the morale of the community.

Sister Luma Khudher stumbles over blocks of stone to enter the courtyard of the convent she and other Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena once called home. An image of the Virgin Mary on the wall surrounded by torn pages from religious books, tattered cloths and entwined metal rods from broken desks attests to the former life of this place.

"Growing up, it was natural to be a Christian," says Sister Luma, reminiscing about the 80's, when Iraqi Christians were well integrated

The CNEWA *Connection*

Since the earliest days of the 2014 displacement of Iraqi Christians, CNEWA has been in constant contact with the local churches, standing in solidarity with those who are suffering and accompanying them as they seek to rebuild their lives. The impact has been dramatic.

Through our key partners in the region, the bishops, priests, sisters and lay leaders of the Chaldean and Syriac churches, CNEWA has provided material support — milk, clothing, food — along with spiritual assistance, through education, catechesis and activities to help children cope with their new surroundings.

Additionally, we have worked to set up emergency programs for displaced families — most of whom have lost everything. With our partners on the ground, we have provided winter and summer kits and launched mobile clinics to attend to ongoing health needs.

Looking to the future, CNEWA is developing new programs to sustain the Iraqi people. We are planning vocational training courses to help young people develop necessary skills; we are also working to help those who have lost businesses attain grants so that they can begin again. Additionally, our planned literacy and foreign language courses will help those who have been internally displaced find a job or adapt to their new circumstances.

To learn how you can support this vital work, call: 1-800-442-6392 (United States) or 1-866-322-4441 (Canada).

and constituted an educated, leading section of Iraqi society. "Now, people are asking themselves: 'Why is this happening to us?' 'What does it mean to be an Iraqi Christian?' "

These existential questions echo through the graffiti-covered walls of the convent. On one, the name of Al Qaeda's slain leader, Osama Bin Laden, is sprayed above a rendering of the Shahada, Islam's profession of faith. Broken crosses, smashed statues and hateful language scribbled on the walls of churches offer no comfort to those pondering the position of Christians in Iraq.

Yet, when inhabitants first returned to their liberated villages and saw the burned and desecrated churches where, for generations, they celebrated liturgies, weddings and funerals, their first reaction was to look for church bells, prop them up and start ringing them again.

"ISIS might have been defeated," says Slewa Shamoon Aba, 76, a retired teacher and artist, "but the pervasive extremist mentality is still there." That concern, he adds, "cannot be erased."

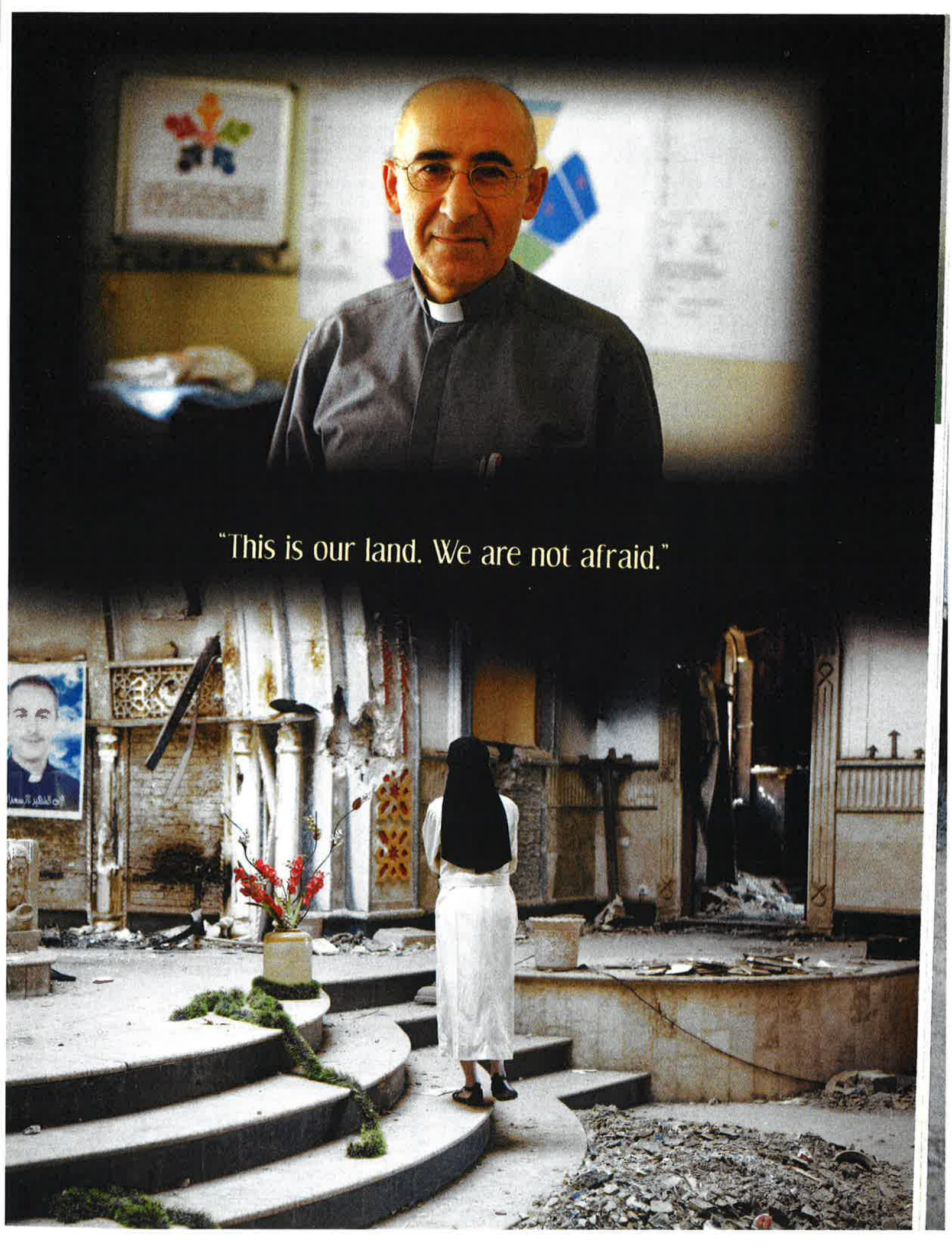
Mr. Aba, who spent his life collecting traditional looms, radios, costumes and other memorabilia in the basement of his home, says he was deeply disappointed with his Muslim compatriots.

Returning to his garden, he had found his mannequins — once dressed in colorful traditional clothes he had made — in pieces. A crucifix in a Christmas grotto he had built was likewise broken.

◤ A mobile clinic's physician fills prescriptions for displaced families while visiting the village of Sharafiya.

◥ The Rev. Georges Jahola, a native of Qaraqosh, leads church efforts to rebuild the city.

▶ A Dominican sister visits the Church of Sts. Behnam and Sarah.



"This is our land. We are not afraid."

Mr. Aba says he had taught generations of Muslims in Mosul and in other neighboring villages. "It pains me to see them radicalized," he says.

Many Iraqi Christians believe their Muslim neighbors, people who once shopped at their stores and shared their food, looted their homes after the invasion. Some say the occupiers branded Qaraqosh a "mall," inviting Muslims to take furniture and electronic items freely from deserted Christian homes.

Today, many Christians refuse to go back to towns with mixed religious populations, such as Tel Kaif, for fear for their safety. The same holds for Christians' return to large, once-diverse urban centers, especially the city of Mosul. Property destruction has proven less discouraging than a sense of violated trust, and doubts linger about once more coexisting with their Sunni neighbors.

The very people who drove them from their homes, some worry, could have shaved their beards and dissolved into the civilian population.

In 2003, Iraq was home to an estimated 1.5 million Christians. Today, 14 years since the United States invaded Iraq, only around 250,000 remain as a result of waves of kidnappings, targeted killings and the 2014 ISIS invasion. Some managed to immigrate to Western countries such as Australia, the United States and various nations in Europe. But a great many remain in limbo in Jordan and Lebanon, waiting to either leave or return.

There are no signs that Iraqis abroad would return any time soon to what everybody believes is the "big unknown."

"Unless Christians are allowed to govern their region under international protection, they won't feel safe," says the Rev. Behnam Benoka, a Syriac Catholic priest who has worked with CNEWA and its partners to provide health care to displaced Iraqis in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Security for Christians in Iraq remains a thorny issue. Units of Christian militias staff checkpoints around Christian towns, but they lack proper training and arms, and ultimately defer to the authority of the Iraqi army, various Shiite militias or Kurdish Peshmerga forces.

The growing tension between Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi central government places Christians between a rock and a hard place. People fear a controversial referendum for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan might make the teetering situation explode.

Today, the Nineveh Plain region is divided into two zones —

Returning residents of Tel Eskof sign up to receive aid packages through the local authorities.

one under the control of the Kurds and the other, where Qaraqosh lies, under the control of the Iraqi government.

In the Kurdish-held area, about 20 miles north of Mosul lies Tel Eskof, one of the major Assyro-Chaldean towns gradually returning to life. According to its mayor, a third of the original 1,500 families of Tel Eskof are back, in addition to several hundred families who lost their homes in neighboring towns.

In the main shopping district, men gather around the back of a pickup truck filled with watermelons. They haggle with the seller, patting the fruit to pick the best ones. Nearby, signs on a freshly painted store proudly advertise alcoholic beverages. Across the street, a shop repairs bicycles for children eager to reclaim the streets as their playground. In the coffee shops, men smoke water pipes and play cards.

Further down the road, a long line of women and men of all ages queue outside a community center to receive aid packages from local authorities. Each family receives basic groceries such as rice, sugar and oil, as well as blankets and a fan.

Years of displacement from home, livelihood and savings have left many families impoverished. A poor economy has led to a heavy reliance on government jobs, where the monthly pay has significantly decreased in the past few years. These factors combined make it difficult to restart life.

For those who have been displaced multiple times, even the prospect of rebuilding can only elicit a half-hearted, guarded enthusiasm.

"A home is nothing without its people," says Leila Aziz, a feisty 40-something chemistry teacher and mother of four.

Most of Mrs. Aziz's family has left Iraq. Her home in nearby Batnaya, which remains totally deserted, has been "totally flattened." Having lost everything, she moved with her husband and two of her children to Tel Eskof to live in the house of relatives who left for Australia.

To bring joy into their new, unfamiliar home, Mrs. Aziz bought her youngest son, 12-year-old Angel, a small, friendly dog named Tita.

But she says the pain of her dispersed family is difficult to heal. Her two eldest sons left college for Lebanon, where they work in low-wage jobs while waiting to be resettled by the United Nations in a Western country.

"The new generation wants to see life," she says. "They want to go to the cinema, to go out, to feel simply normal."

Not everybody wants to leave. Ayman Ramzi Gharib, a slim, cheerful 22-year-old driver, traveled to Jordan earlier in July as the first step to join the rest of his family in Australia. But after a couple of weeks, he returned.

"I can't imagine my life away from home," he says as he opens the door to his damaged family home.

Mr. Gharib married last year while displaced to nearby Al Qosh — the only Christian enclave that avoided ISIS occupation. Now, he has a newborn daughter, Orvelia, and temporarily shares an apartment with his brother while he finishes repairing their house.

Past the kitchen of the bare house, the sun filters through a hole in the ceiling. Mr. Gharib stares at a reproduction on the wall of Christ and the Virgin Mary, with rays of light emanating from their hearts.

"I was born and raised here. This is all I know in life."

Raed Rafei is a Beirut-based journalist and independent filmmaker whose writing has appeared in The Los Angeles Times, Forbes Arabia and the Daily Star of Lebanon.

FOR MORE ON IRAQI CHRISTIANS RETURNING HOME, VISIT OUR BLOG, ONE-TO-ONE:

cnewablog.org/web/towns

AND CHECK OUT RAED RAFEI'S EXCLUSIVE VIDEO AT:

onemagazinehome.org/web/towns