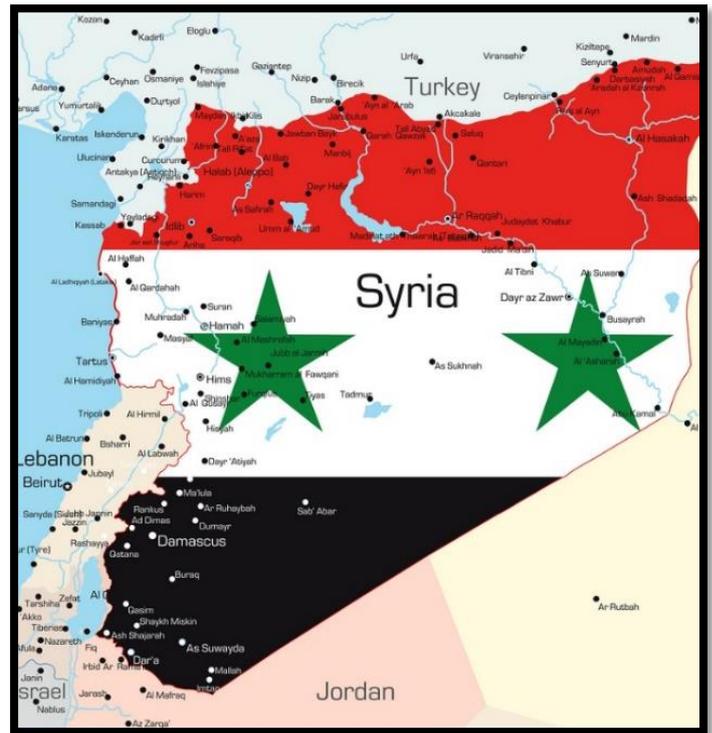


# 10 LESSONS FROM SYRIA

*for a post-election South Africa and a pre-election USA*

## SYRIA

- **11 million** people are uprooted
- **450,000+** Christians fled the country
- **3 million +** children are displaced
- **500,000** died over the past five years
- **More than half the population** are in need of humanitarian assistance
- **1 person** died violently every 10 minutes during the war



By Mike Burnard

Standing 500 meters away from where al-Nusra snipers were positioned in the town of Muhrada, seeing the destruction of eight years of war, hearing the bombs exploding and mortars being fired and feeling the impact against your chest (from the conflict still raging in the Idlib area), the only thought and cry that came to mind was: *“Lord, have mercy.”*

A team from INcontext International travelled to Syria in May in order to understand the realities of faith when a Church is caught in a prolonged war. The group visited churches and met believers in Damascus, Jaramana, Homs, Aleppo and Muhrada.

City after city and town after town bore the painful scars of the brutal eight-year war. It seemed like a giant had come and stepped on this nation, crushing every building he could find. BUT what the Islamic State and the rebels could not achieve was crushing the spirit of the Church. The war in Syria has not only produced a strong and vibrant Church but has created lessons of faith that few would have the privilege of experiencing. The team found strength in the midst of brokenness and beauty amongst the ashes. The Church in Syria truly reflects the words of Brennan Manning: *“In Love’s service, only wounded soldiers can serve.”*

Observing the Church in Syria brought a new conviction of how a Church can influence a nation: not by fighting evil with evil nor by cursing darkness, but simply by living Christ and being light. The team encountered many heroes of faith and experienced divine meetings, during which we learned **TEN LESSONS** from the Church in Syria for a ‘post-election’ South Africa and a ‘pre-election’ USA.

## 1. IMPARTIAL CHRISTIANITY

The first thing that caught the group by surprise was the respect that the Church has from the community – soldiers, Muslims and non-believers alike. During the eight years of war, the Church had discovered a key to reaching the hearts of the nation: they remained impartial and never chose sides between the rival factions of government, rebels or freedom fighters. This gave the Church favour beyond comprehension.

From the border with Lebanon up to Aleppo in the North, the group travelled through more than 70 checkpoints. At every one, the INcontext contact would greet the soldiers and introduce us with these words: *“We are people from the Church.”* While other vehicles were searched, we were waved through with warm smiles and heartfelt *“Ahlan wasahlan”* (*“Welcome, welcome”*). This seemed surreal in a majority Muslim nation where one would normally think to hide one’s Christianity.

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** In order to live a full witness for Christ, we cannot favour one group and demonise another. A true 'person of peace' is the one who listens to all and counsels with impartial wisdom. Anyone that chooses sides – politically, culturally or racially – becomes irrelevant as a reconciler and peacemaker.

## 2. INFLUENTIAL CHRISTIANITY

Sandy is a 23-year-old secretary at the Baptist Church in Jaramana, a city that has been hit with more than 16,000 missiles during the past five years. She has seen suffering beyond her years and has witnessed hardships that a young person of her age should not endure. We stood amazed at her maturity when asked an honest but simple question: *"Have you ever thought of leaving Syria during the past five years?"* Her answer literally left us speechless: *"When things change for the better I might consider leaving, but during the war we have decided to stay so that we can help people and be the vessels of change that make the difference."*

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** In order to influence our communities, we have to do it from the inside out. Safety and security should never be the reason to stay in or leave a country. Our mandate is to 'be Christ' to those who suffer injustice and indignity in our nations. Our hope is not based on political leaders or political parties. With Christ in us, we are the answer to many prayers rising up within our respective nations.

## 3. INDESTRUCTIBLE CHRISTIANITY

As we stood in a deserted and completely destroyed town on the outskirts of Homs, we could scarcely contain our emotions. We had seen many similar images before on TV, but a TV screen can never do justice to the reality of what happens when bombs explode. The four-story buildings, folded up like broken concertinas, stood as a testimony of the human ability to destroy and kill.

The pastor interrupted our thoughts as he pointed to a red poppy blooming amongst the rubble. *"The destruction was born in the war,"* he said, *"but life is more visible in the context of death than anywhere else. In midst of destruction, living stones are more visible than in a time of peace."*

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** Light is not scared of darkness. Christianity is not the victim of bad politicians. Bad politicians are the consequence of a lack of true Christian witness. Darkness can never overcome light, but when light fades, darkness steps in. Corruption and crime are not the fault of corrupt politicians, but a result of a Church that failed to provide a moral compass in a politically volatile community. Christianity is therefore the answer to secularism. We don't have to defend our moral values – we just have to live them.



## 4. INFECTIOUS CHRISTIANITY

The long nine-hour drive from Damascus to Aleppo is both exhilarating and dangerous, either because of the war or because of the traffic, depending on which route you take. Due to the current fighting in Idlib, the group had to avoid the main road and take a detour via As Sa'an. This took us past small villages with destroyed houses and plundered buildings bearing testimony to the war. When our host decided to stop for coffee on the outskirts of Homs, a conversation with a stranger soon ended up with our host fetching a Bible from the car. We realised anew that for him, the journey was as much an opportunity to share the Gospel as it was about reaching a destination. Every meeting was an opportunity. Every individual was precious. And every encounter was infectious.

We also realised that our host saw the checkpoints on the road not only as an opportunity to witness God at work but also as a wonderful opportunity to bear witness to a God at work. At one of the stops outside Aleppo, a soldier approached our host and as he looked into the car and saw we were Christians, he immediately asked a blessing. Our host prayed for him and then as we pulled away, he stopped the car and asked: *"One more blessing, please."*

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** If we miss the opportunity to be 'infectious' when we encounter people who are different to us, we miss an opportunity to change lives, communities and ultimately the future of our nations. It starts with one blessing at a traffic light, accompanied by a love for souls. We have a mandate to bless those who curse us and to pray for those who seek to harm us. In Syria, Christians are known as people who bless, not as people who judge. In a politically volatile time, believers in South Africa and the USA have found it easier to 'demonise' the opposition rather than blessing them. In the

'new' (yet still old) political climate, Christians should be known as people who can ensure a future – not people who curse the present.

## 5. INTENTIONAL CHRISTIANITY

As the group entered the Idlib province, security increased. At one checkpoint, the soldier looked at our host and asked: “*Do you have any weapons?*” The answer came quickly but was unexpected: “*My heart is my weapon.*” The soldier laughed and indicated that we could move through, but the words stayed in our hearts.

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** Our heart *IS* our ‘weapon’. We either give life or drain life, depending on the substance of our hearts. Our attitudes reflect the Christ that we serve. We will either unite or divide, in and outside the Church. We have to live intentional lives for our communities to change. We can no longer expect political parties to provide what the Church has been entrusted with. It is the role of the Church, not political parties, to provide the platform for a healthy community. Political leaders can only build on what the Church establishes; a weak Church will see weak communities.

## 6. INVITING CHRISTIANITY

Aleppo is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. With an official population of 4.6 million in 2010, Aleppo was the largest Syrian city before the war started in 2011. Today, Aleppo is probably the third-largest city in Syria after the capital, Damascus, and Homs. We had the joy of visiting Reverend Ibrahim, the head of the Presbyterian Church in Aleppo, who explained that even though the Christian population has decreased by more than 90% in Aleppo due to the war, their church has increased from 60 people to 200 people attending services, and only 10 of these are Presbyterian. He explained it as follows: “*If Syria is a garden of flowers, then the Church is the rose, the fragrance of which is reaching even those in government.*”

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** May we be found to be ‘people of fragrance’ who draw people into the Kingdom. May we be salt and light in times of political uncertainty. May we be the reconciling component in a divided community and people of peace where others are fighting. May our governments take note of us, not because of our complaints and criticisms but because our inviting fragrance.



## 7. INVOLVED CHRISTIANITY

The journey from Aleppo back to Damascus was interrupted by a two-day stopover in a Christian village close to Hama, on the banks of the Orontes River. On the day we left, three hospitals were bombed, and the following day, six Christians died when the Presbyterian Church was bombed. Over the past three years, attacks on the village have been relentless. More than 10,200 bombs have fallen on the village – an average of one bomb per square meter. The leader of the small Evangelical Church described the challenges in detail: “*Being only 500 meters from the al-Nusra and Islamic State frontline, we would often drive back home from a meeting with the lights completely switched off and then, arriving at our homes, we would crawl out of our cars and literally leopard-crawl to our homes. BUT,*” she concluded, “*we did not cancel one single meeting during the eight years of war.*”

In Aleppo, we witnessed the same level of commitment when visiting a Franciscan monastery. During the height of the war, when bombs were exploding all around the city, church volunteers fed 18,000 people every day. More than half a million people were fed every month by people in desperate need of assistance themselves – a testimony of an involved and selfless faith.

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** Our commitment to Christ and our involvement in ministry should never be determined by external factors such as security, safety or even finances. Our commitment is to Christ, regardless of the circumstances. It is not a reckless faith – it is selfless faith. We seek the Kingdom of God FIRST and then look to our governments for justice and peace.

## 8. INSPIRATIONAL CHRISTIANITY

The Latin root of the word “*inspiration*” means “to breathe into”. But before “*inspiration*” was used in connection with the physical process of breathing, it had a distinctly theological meaning in English – a “divine influence upon a person from a divine entity”. This applies perfectly to the Church in Syria. One pastor, living in the heat of the warzone, explained to us that they first prayed fervently that the war would stop. “*But,*” she said, “*today we pray that the Lord will fulfil His purposes through us and that the Lord will use us as His servants in the midst of the war.*”

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** We are not called to escape hardship and troubles, but to continue being God's vessels of hope, peace and reconciliation. Yes, we pray for an end to corruption, crime and violence. But we also seek to *BE* the vessels of hope, peace and reconciliation instead of the *BENEFICIARIES* of hope, peace and reconciliation.

## 9. INCOMPREHENSIBLE CHRISTIANITY

The message of the cross is foolishness to the world. We stood amazed as we listened to the confessions of those who have suffered and witnessed unimaginable hardships. *"May our hardships translate into compassion for others,"* was the prayer of one pastor. *"We are people of the cross. We are people who live for the better of our nation,"* said another. *"We pray that our lack will never prevent us from being more generous,"* said another as we entered a room with tables laden with food fit for a king.

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** We cannot allow the enemy to hijack our mandate to love and replace it with fear and suspicion. We cannot allow hardships to make us bitter and angry. We cannot be led by the politics of suspicion instead of the Word of God and a message of forgiveness and reconciliation. As Christians, we carry the only Source of peace and we cannot afford to become corrupted with hatred and division. We are the people of the cross. Light becomes most evident when it is dark.

## 10. INNOCENT CHRISTIANITY

*"Our hearts of stone become hearts of flesh when we learn where the outcast weeps,"* wrote Brennan Manning. It is as simple as that. Christianity needs to be the innocent, visible expression of a crucified Saviour. When we met the courageous, committed, compassionate, friendly, generous and hospitable people of Syria, we saw the 'marks of the cross' and felt the peace that Christ promised. We found a vibrant Church. We found that light is never overcome by darkness. We found 'living stones' amongst the skeletons of buildings. We found flowers amongst the graves. And we found the Living God dwelling among the people of Syria (Revelation 21:3-5). We found God, and we found that He is beginning to make everything new.

**For Christians in the West, the message is this:** We need to return to the less complicated, innocent simplicity of a theology rooted in Christ who came to set the captives free. We need to love, pray, forgive and bless. These are the non-negotiables of Christianity. We have complicated the Gospel of Christ to such an extent that world doesn't see Christ anymore but only the rules that are a burden. In Syria, the Gospel is blameless, simple and pure – "innocent" in the true sense of the word.

We would like to thank all the saints who received us in Syria, our heroes who accompanied us from Lebanon, and our partners who joined us in prayer across the globe. Please join us in prayer as we continue to lift Syria before the throne of God:

- Pray for the Church, the people and the leadership.
- Pray for peace.
- Pray for God's provision.

And consider joining hands with INcontext as we seek to strengthen the 'living stones' of the Church in Syria. For more information about how to do this, follow this link: <https://www.incontextinternational.org/project-hero/>

