

WHERE WORLDS MEET

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Arabic-speaking Nazarenes plant churches in Poland

By Gina Grate Pottenger



Rafi, fled to Poland with his mother, Lena, (pictured) and his father for relief and peace from the civil war in Syria. Although they did not imagine they would stay in Poland, hoping they could return home when things calmed, now they are planting Nazarene churches in Poland that are reaching people of many nationalities.

Two Arabic-speaking Nazarene churches have been planted in Poland after a Nazarene family took refuge from the Syrian civil war in Poznan.

Lena, Nidal and their son Rafi were involved with the Nazarene church in their home city when the civil war threatened to take their son. When they fled to Poland, along with hundreds of other Arabic-speaking refugees, they met Nazarene missionaries who connected them with the Nazarene church there. They say they understand now that this is where God wants them.

'This is what I'm looking for'

Back in Syria, Lena and her family originally worshipped God in a Catholic church, where Lena developed a deep love for God and joy in knowing Him.

"Since I was young, I loved Jesus so much. I had a relationship with Him," Lena said.

In 2005, Lena joined the teaching staff at the Nazarene primary school in her city. The pastor who worked in the school invited Lena to attend a Sunday service at the Nazarene church. The teaching she heard there helped to deepen her understanding of, and relationship with, God.

"I saw that this is what I'm looking for," she recalls. "I wanted this, so I started to come. My sons also came with me."

Lena and her husband, Nidal, have two sons: Rafi and Wadi. The young men loved attending the church. The family joined a Bible study, volunteered in various ministries, and became members. Rafi played the piano for worship.

God's care in the midst of war

When the civil war began, their city was spared much of the fighting. Rafi continued working at a fast food restaurant, Lena

WAR: Safety in Poland brings opportunity

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still taught at the school, and church life went on as usual. But even so, sometimes bombs fell in the city.

One day, Lena was at the church when Rafi stumbled into the building covered in soot and debris, his clothing torn. Lena screamed in fear until Rafi assured her he was unhurt.

"Mom, I'm good, nothing happened to me," he insisted. He had been at his job to open the fast food shop when a bomb exploded nearby.

On another day, Rafi and Wadi were on their way to the church to practice music for the Sunday service when bombs began to rain down on the neighborhood. Every meter another fell as they raced to the church for shelter.

The closest bombing happened across from their home. Lena had already left for work at school but her sons were still in bed. A rocket fell on the building opposite their home, causing a deafening explosion and rocking their house.

"When I opened my eyes, I thought, 'I will not see my brother or anything. I will be in heaven,'" Rafi recalled. But both young men were safe and unharmed yet again.

Lena said the family lived with constant stress caused by the threat of recurring attacks.

"We were not afraid, because we know God will protect us and provide everything for us. But, when you heard a lot of bombs or see a lot of things, you always feel stressed."

Refugees from the harder-hit areas poured into the city. The church

began a ministry providing food, clothes, household supplies, and heating in the winter. Church members visited families to comfort them, listen to their stories, pray for those who were willing, and help them resettle in the city. They ministered to everyone, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. Some chose to visit the Nazarene church and some gave their lives to Christ.

Seeking safety in Poland

When the stress of the bombing became too much, Lena and Nidal decided it was time to leave the country, taking Rafi with them. Wadi stayed behind with his family and settled in another city. Later, Wadi became a pastor, and now leads a Nazarene church there.

Nidal and Lena's journey took them to Poland, where Lena's brother lived. Compared with the millions who apply for asylum in Western European countries, only about 100 to 300 people have applied for asylum in Poland each year since the Syrian conflict began. Most who travel to Poland continue on to Western Europe.

Sometime after the family first arrived, they believed their time in Poland would be temporary, that when the war ended they could return home. While they waited for their asylum papers to be processed, Nazarene missionaries in Poznan heard the family was there. They went to visit them, and soon after the family began attending the Nazarene services there.

"We came to Poland with about 150 people," Rafi said. "Most of them have gone to Germany. But we decided to stay here because God sent us here. He wants us here. He has a plan for us here."

Lena and Rafi wanted to study theology. They discovered that



"We came to Poland with about 150 people. Most of them have gone to Germany. But we decided to stay here because God sent us here. He has a plan for us here."

-- Rafi

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CHURCH: Nazarenes reach variety of nationalities

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Rafi could remotely enroll in Arabic Nazarene Bible College, and learn in Arabic. Lena studies in the English language through European Nazarene College.

Since coming to Poland, Rafi's call to ministry has become more clear to him.

"Back in Syria I was thinking about being a pastor, but I didn't know when," he said. "After I came to Poland, I saw that God is really calling me to be a pastor. So I talked with [the missionaries], and I asked them to help continue my studies. So, since that time, I have started to work on myself to be a good pastor."

Arabic-speaking churches form in Poland

In 2016, Rafi had the church's support to invite Arabic-speaking people in the city for a one-day conference to gauge interest in starting an Arabic-language worship service. Twenty people participated. Out of this, Rafi and Lena started an Arabic-speaking church. As it grew, the congregation rented space from a Pentecostal church, then later moved to a Baptist church, which gave them a room free of cost. The Poznan congregation finally

has its own rented space, supported through Nazarene Compassionate Ministries.

As the church continued growing, they started a second Arabic-speaking church in Warsaw. Rafi leads worship at one on Saturday and the other one on Sunday.

Before the global pandemic began in March, combined attendance at both locations

was about 50 people. Once the pandemic reached Poland, the churches shifted to Zoom meetings and services, rather than in-person worship.

"Our vision is to reach the Arabs here and try to evangelize them," Rafi said.

Lena said the refugees in Poland have developed a community around their shared culture and language that overcomes religious differences. They have become close friends with people from a variety of faith backgrounds, just as they did in Syria before the civil war.

The Arabic-speaking church has opened doors for sharing God with people, both immigrants and Poles. Once a Polish journalist came to do a video segment about the church. The journalist belongs to another Christian tradition, and was fascinated by the uninhibited ways the Nazarenes praised God, sang, and prayed. Rafi's sermon about the differences between Judas and Peter, who both denied Christ before Judas ended his own life and Peter repented, has stayed with the man.

"I always remember these words," the man told Rafi. "I want to be like Peter, not Judas."

The journalist has developed a relationship with Rafi, Lena, and the church, and continues to visit occasionally, even though he lives a distance of seven hours away.

"He started to study the Bible, and then he had a lot of questions," Lena said. "He started to share Jesus with people around him. He became a Christian and regularly attends his church."

Lena also shared Jesus with her Polish language teacher, a woman from Ukraine. Every time they met to study, they would end up talking about Jesus for half an hour. On their last meeting, the woman prayed to receive Jesus. Soon after, she moved away and started a family, but earlier this year she sent Lena a message: "Lena, now I know God like you. I know Him and I have a relationship with Him. I always pray and I learn what you taught me." ♦

Nazarenes in England feed the hungry, support elderly health

Delivering food to the hungry and offering online exercise classes for the elderly are a few ways that Nazarene churches in the United Kingdom are serving their communities during the coronavirus pandemic.

By Gina Grate Pottenger

Food parcel deliveries in South Leeds

The South Leeds Church of the Nazarene has operated a food bank for a number of years. Members of the congregation donate to keep it stocked, and social service agencies refer local people when they experience food insecurity.

When the church building closed to comply with the national lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic, church volunteers began delivering food parcels weekly to families referred for help.

Morrison's grocery store has been donating food to the food bank, and the congregation has also bought food in bulk to supplement the donations.

"The list of deliveries has been increasing weekly," said Pastor David Montgomery. "We have been serving two particular communities—Zimbabwean and Hungarian—as well as anyone else in need." ♦



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ENGLAND: ‘There was a genuine risk of starvation’

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Meal delivery to hungry households in Rochdale

In the borough of Rochdale, just north of Manchester in northern England, members of the Ashton-under-Lyne Church of the Nazarene answered John Wigley's urgent call for help in delivering hundreds of meals daily to people who otherwise would not be able to eat during the pandemic.

Wigley had been part of The Soup Kitchen, a volunteer-led service managed by Sanctuary Trust, a Christian charity that partners with the Church of the Nazarene. Among the trust's many ministries is The Soup Kitchen, which typically serves hot meals each day to about 50 people in Rochdale who are homeless or live on a very low income. However, when most businesses and services closed due to the pandemic, The Soup Kitchen closed, too.

"A lot of the people that access The Soup Kitchen rely on the service just to eat.

There was a genuine risk of starvation for this cohort of people," he said.

The last night The Soup Kitchen was open, March 24, they acquired addresses for 31 households, as sometimes those who are homeless find temporary places to stay with acquaintances or friends. Wigley and a friend delivered food to them, while implementing safety and cleanliness measures as advised by the government.



But Wigley couldn't conduct daily deliveries and continue his full-

time work as regional manager of the Sanctuary Trust. So he issued a call for help to the church, and 10 people volunteered to deliver the meals.

"The next problem was food," he said.

"We were running out."

Several major supermarkets and the local council stepped in to donate food.

"Before long, we were serving 330 households four times a week – 1,200 food parcels a week."

The distribution swelled beyond the group's capacity. So, Wigley applied for a grant which was given to hire a full-time coordinator.

Naming the endeavor the Homelessness Network opens participation to any organization moved to be involved with the feeding program. As of the end of May, nine charities have gotten involved.

The food distribution ministry is viewed as a stopgap during the pandemic. Wigley plans to re-open The Soup Kitchen as soon as the stopgap eases and it can safely do so. ♦



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ELDERLY: Chair exercises help people at risk of falling and provide social interaction

Armchair exercises for shut-ins

For six years, Clare McMullan has taught chair-based exercises to elderly people in the community, or those who are too frail for regular exercising. But when the pandemic required especially vulnerable people, including the elderly, to stay at home, McMullan moved the exercise lessons to the Morley Church of the Nazarene's Facebook page.

McMullan is a qualified instructor in chair-based exercise, which aims to reduce the risk of falling for older adults, allowing them to remain independent in their own homes for longer.

"This is a government target, and the course I run was developed by physiotherapists and is recognised throughout the country," she said. "The class is fun and we have lots of laughs, but it is vital in encouraging them to push themselves so that they continue to build their muscle tone. The other vital part of chair-based exercise is the social interactions, therefore helping to reduce the negative effects of isolation on their mental health, as most of the people who attend are single."

The recorded exercise sessions on Facebook have reached over 150 people, McMullan said. Due to the positive response, she plans to continue posting video lessons even after lockdown requirements are eased.

But she is going beyond just posting video exercises.

"I am also ringing up and checking on the people who attend the classes. This has been a vital outreach for us in continuing to support the people and meet new people who will hopefully come to us after the lockdown. From this group we will hopefully be setting up some new groups after the lockdown." ♦



Who are Nazarenes?

We are a Christian people

As members of the Church Universal, we join with all true believers in proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ and in affirming the historic Trinitarian creeds and beliefs of the Christian faith. We value our Wesleyan-Holiness heritage and believe it to be a way of understanding the faith that is true to Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience.

We are a holiness people

God, who is holy, calls us to a life of holiness. We believe that the Holy Spirit seeks to do in us a second work of grace, called by various terms including "entire sanctification" and "baptism with the Holy Spirit"-cleansing us from all sin, renewing us in the image of God, empowering us to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves, and producing in us the character of Christ. Holiness in the life of believers is most clearly understood as Christlikeness.

We are a missional people

We are a sent people, responding to the call of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to go into all the world, witnessing to the Lordship of Christ and participating with God in the building of the Church and the extension of His kingdom (Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1). Our mission (a) begins in worship, (b) ministers to the world in evangelism and compassion, (c) encourages believers toward Christian maturity through discipleship, and (d) prepares women and men for Christian service through Christian higher education.

Learn more at: www.nazarene.org/articles-faith

"He is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end."

-- Daniel 6:26

Prayer requests

Please pray for the many Nazarenes globally, as well as across the United Kingdom, who are responding to Spirit-led opportunities to serve and minister to their communities during the coronavirus pandemic. Pray that hearts would open, people would find Jesus as Lord, and believers would grow and deepen their faith through these opportunities and challenges.

Pray for Lena, Pastor Rafi and the Nazarenes in Poland as they worship God, grow and deepen their faith, and share Jesus with their friends and community. Pray for God's blessing and protection on these new churches as they grow in size and maturity.

Where Worlds Meet

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