

Christian aid groups vow to stay in Syria

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [November 20, 2019](#) issue



Syrian women who were displaced by the Turkish military operation in northeastern Syria line up to receive aid and food supplies at the Bardarash refugee camp, north of Mosul, Iraq, on Oct. 17. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

Last month, the pastor of a Kurdish Christian church in northeastern Syria gathered his congregation to decide whether to leave or stay as Turkish forces pressed into the region after US troops had suddenly withdrawn. In an area threatened for years by both the Syrian civil war and the international fight against the Islamic State group, the church was now in the path of a new offensive against the Kurdish militias that Turkey had branded as terrorists.

Just eight families told the pastor they planned to leave, according to Open Doors president and CEO David Curry, whose organization supports persecuted Christians

in the region. Most decided to stay.

“The rest are staying to try to be salt and light and love in this community. So that kind of courage is the thing that sticks out to me,” said Curry.

Other stories have emerged from Syria: missiles falling on communities, churches attacked by ground forces, and a [feared resurgence](#) of the Islamic State group, also known as ISIS, and other extremist groups, according to Curry.

Children have been injured and killed in bombings in towns along the border with Turkey, according to [the Washington Post](#).

At least 166,000 people have been displaced since the Turkish invasion began October 9, [according to the United Nations](#). At least 21 civilians were killed during a supposed cease-fire announced last week by the US and Turkey, [according to the Kurdish Red Crescent](#).

And US Christians have been quick to react—not only expressing disapproval of President Donald Trump’s October 6 decision to remove about 1,000 soldiers who had provided a cordon of security for the Kurdish areas in Syria but also springing into action via Christian aid groups operating in that country, including Curry’s Open Doors.

“There are great security concerns for the Kurds and the Christians in this area,” Curry said.

What happens in Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria is important to Christians in the US because the Kurds in turn offer sanctuary to Christian, Yazidi, and other persecuted religious minorities that the Trump administration has vowed to protect.

The Kurds, most of whom are Muslim, have welcomed those religious minorities and “allowed them to live in and amongst them as you would hope they would do in a great society,” Curry said. They have fought alongside US troops against ISIS.

“I think right now there’s great puzzlement, surprise, disappointment that the Western world, from their perspective, seems to have abandoned them. And we’ve got to make sure that, from my perspective, we’re supporting these religious minorities,” Curry said.

Trump [has said](#) the conflict between Turkey and the Kurds in northeast Syria “has nothing to do with us” and [compared the two sides](#) to “two kids” fighting.

“Our votes caused this as the United States,” said Jeremy Courtney, founder of Preemptive Love, a Christian-led coalition that has been on the ground in Syria since 2016. “Whether you voted for or against, at the end of the day, we’re all one nation, and so our American votes 100 percent gave the Kurds over—surrendered the Kurdish civilian population over to carnage, to destruction—and we need to take a kind of collective American responsibility for what we’ve done.”

Meanwhile, some of the president’s most faithful conservative evangelical defenders have been uncharacteristically outspoken in their disagreement with him over Syria.

In a statement written before the cease-fire was announced, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference executive vice president Tony Suarez said: “This is not a decision most Evangelicals advocated for. There have been conversations with members of the administration since the decision came about. I continue to believe that we have and are making a difference.”

Suarez said he was pleased with the leadership taken by Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who traveled to Turkey to broker the cease-fire with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. That cease-fire, which Turkey has called a “pause,” was [set to end](#) October 22.

Suarez also called Syria “a total mess” and said an eventual attack by Turkey was inevitable.

After Trump announced the withdrawal, televangelist Pat Robertson [said on The 700 Club](#) that the president was “in danger of losing the mandate of heaven” if he abandoned Kurdish and Christian minorities in the region.

Franklin Graham, son of the late evangelist Billy Graham, called on Christians to pray that Trump would change his mind as the evangelical relief agency Graham leads, Samaritan’s Purse, mobilized to help people in the region.

Graham later [told evangelical outlet CBN News](#) he doesn’t want to “second-guess” the president.

“The decision’s been made, and the president certainly had his reasons, and I respect his decision. Now we have to deal with the fallout,” he said.

For Samaritan's Purse, which has operations in nearby Iraq, that means supporting the humanitarian needs of Kurds who have been displaced from their homes, according to Ken Isaacs, who oversees the organization's international relief projects.

The organization is working with partners to provide tarps for emergency shelter, cooking supplies, and medical care, as well as blankets and warm clothing, as "winter is coming, and they fled their homes with the clothes on their back," Isaacs said.

"In some ways, it's a typical refugee situation where people have the same needs as refugees," he said.

Preemptive Love, which works with people of all faiths, has been providing food to displaced families and just launched two mobile clinics in northeast Syria to provide urgent medical care. It already has run out of food, [according to its website](#).

The US withdrawal has "jeopardized" its work in the northeastern part of the country, according to Ben Irwin, a spokesperson for the organization.

Despite fears that the return of ISIS in the region will threaten the safety of its teams, Irwin said, "we are not going anywhere."

Open Doors began its work in Syria before civil war broke out in 2011, trying to "support and to strengthen the Christian communities there, some of which are quite historic," Curry said.

As ISIS took over parts of the country, many Christians fled to the Kurdish-controlled region in the north, where the Kurds have protected them, he said. Open Doors estimates about 50,000 Christians live in the region.

"Now with the Kurds under attack, these Christian communities are particularly vulnerable," he said.

For now, Open Doors is offering relief to those communities in the form of food, water, medical care, and temporary housing, but "it may turn into a larger humanitarian problem," Curry said.

"It sure seems like it could go that direction, but we're doing those kinds of basic relief for these Christian communities," he said.

“It will be ongoing, so it’s going to be a big challenge,” he added. “I think we need to rise to it.”

For Preemptive Love’s Irwin, that means staying with the Kurds long after the crisis has slowed.

“Keep showing up. Keep sending help,” he said. “Don’t just support the emergency response now while the bombs are falling. Keep caring about Syria once the rest of the world has moved on, as it has so many times before.” —Religion News Service. RNS national reporter Jack Jenkins and managing editor Roxanne Stone contributed to this report.