

Ibrahim Nseir, pastor in Aleppo, works to be a 'sign of hope'

by [Doreen Martens](#) in the [January 12, 2017](#) issue

Ibrahim Nseir was chatting at a Beirut hotel in late November with others attending a gathering of Protestant leaders from around the Middle East and beyond when a call came from his wife in Aleppo, Syria.

She had just heard that one of the families in their Presbyterian congregation had a rocket land in front of their house at midnight. It blew out the windows, covering the sleeping family with shards of glass. The family survived.

The church where Nseir is pastor was shelled twice earlier in the war and rebuilt. He saw the bodies of ten children killed by a missile. He was visiting patients when a hospital was bombed. A family of five was killed in front of his church.

During the fierce bombardment the city endured recently, his three children did not sleep for a week.

“It is the most difficult situation when you see your child just screaming and all you can do is hold him and say, ‘Don’t worry, I’m here’—but you know you can do nothing,” said Nseir, 46.

About 65 percent of his congregation has now left the country, in part because young men want to avoid being conscripted. Nseir worries about how to help young people afford the costs of tuition so they can stay in Syria but avoid being forced to enter the military.

He estimates that of 150,000 Christians of all denominations in Aleppo before the war, fewer than 20,000 remain. Of those who remain, half are hoping to leave and the other half are too poor to contemplate emigrating.

The future of an ancient Christian community in Syria—the land where Paul received his revelation of the living Jesus—is increasingly in doubt, as those who have hung on through the conflict struggle to cope with a shattered economy. Costs have grown for food, medication, and fuel to run the generators made necessary because the city hasn’t had electricity in three years.

The Syriac Orthodox Church, the Middle East Council of Churches, and the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches are helping churches in Aleppo to care for the most vulnerable people in their communities, both Christians and Muslims.

Mennonite Central Committee, one of the Christian relief organizations providing funding for those efforts, has been assisting the Syriac Orthodox Church in improving access to clean water in the city where many rooftop water tanks have been destroyed by shooting, making even basic hygiene a concern.

Through such partnerships, 225 families in Aleppo are receiving \$50 for each month for 12 months to make it possible for those who want to stay to do so.

Nseir is under pressure to leave from family, some of whom are in the United States, but he resists: “Through my ministry in the last three years, I have worked very hard to be a sign of hope in the city. So many Christians, if they hear that I will leave, they will think the situation is not secure any more, and they will leave too. So these things are a great burden on my shoulders.” —Mennonite Central Committee