

Same Jesus

## **My church is part of a group hosting Syrian refugees. When an Orthodox priest from Homs visited, we were reminded how much they've lost—but also of our shared faith.**

by [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Our little church recently had the opportunity to hear from someone who is a bit of a rarity in southern Alberta: a Syrian Orthodox priest. We have a connection with Father Lukas Awad that goes back three years. I first met him when he was touring the province with a group connected to [Mennonite Central Committee](#). Through a series of events, this initial meeting led to our group of churches sponsoring families from his parish in Homs that were refugees in Lebanon at the time. Father Lukas has 13 families from his parish scattered throughout the province of Alberta, including six here in Lethbridge.

Father Lukas shared about life in Syria, the history of the conflict, the challenges facing the church in Syria and how they are responding. He answered questions with warmth, humility, and gratitude.

The night offered a painful reminder of just how much our Syrian friends have lost. At one point, Father Lukas showed videos of his city and church before and after the conflict. There were scenes of devastation, obviously, but there were also plenty of images of ordinary people going about their daily life in his parish—singing, worshiping, dancing, playing, laughing. I was sitting beside one of our Syrian friends and the tears flowed freely. Perhaps we sometimes imagine that those who flee a war zone will obviously and continuously be grateful and happy for living in a wonderful place like Canada. But Syria is their home. Each one of them has left behind friends and family, familiar forms of communal life, language, culture, food,

weather, etc. These are painful losses and the pain doesn't just go away.

Father Lukas gave another powerful reminder (to me, at least) of the good and vital work that [Mennonite Central Committee](#) does around the world. MCC has been working in Syria since the 1990s. They work with the Orthodox church in providing food, medicine, support in orphanages, and language training among other things. Indeed, Father Lukas's excellent English is due in no small part to the work of MCC in his region. It made me proud to be associated with this agency, even if in a small way.

I was inspired by his stories of how the church is holding fast to Christ, sometimes in the face of enormous persecution and threat of violence. He told stories of those giving up their lives rather than convert to Islam or leave their homes. I heard these stories after spending part of an afternoon reading up on the Anabaptist history of martyrdom for a presentation I was giving. Tertullian famously said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. It was and it is.

Another deeply moving story was when he told us about how his parish in Homs had opened their facility to host over one hundred people for a year and a half. They provided a place to sleep, medicine, and food, with the help of agencies like MCC and others. Most of these people that found refuge in his church were Muslims. He reminded us of the parable of the Good Samaritan and about how Jesus says that "the good man is the one who helps."

I was struck, once again, simply by how ancient the Syrian Orthodox Church is. I knew this, of course—I even put up a timeline of Christian history at the beginning of the evening to give people a sense of how to contextualize and locate Mennonite and Orthodox Christians. But at one point in the evening, Father Lukas was talking about how one church that had recently been rebuilt in his region dated back to AD 59. Which is, like, *before* the gospels were written. A bit of historical perspective, that.

During the question period, someone asked about how Orthodox Christians view Assad. I had secretly hoped this question wouldn't come up. But Father Lukas handled it with humility and honesty. *Yes, Christians tend to support Assad, he said. This is because Bashar and his father Hafez were the first to grant Christians political rights and we fear that these will be taken away. We are only ten percent of the population. We see what has happened after leaders have been overthrown in other*

*countries in the region. We worry about what would come in to fill the vacuum.* Conversations like these have an uncomfortable way of chipping away at assumptions. And I would hope that our Syrian friends would be willing to engage in stories and conversations from other perspectives as well.

Father Lukas and I had some light banter about our “uniforms.” He obviously looks way cooler than I do. He has hair, first of all. And he has robes (my wife always tells me that I should start wearing robes... I somehow don’t think that would fly). The Orthodox and Mennonite churches obviously inhabit very different locations on the Christian spectrum, whether with respect to theology or liturgy or history or all of the above. But I was proud to introduce Father Lukas as my “brother in Christ.” I believe it deeply. And I was equally proud to hear him call me “brother and friend.” It was a more emotional moment than I expected. It called to mind a conversation I had with one of our Syrian friends last year. After commenting on all of the iconography and saints and rituals of the Orthodox Church, I said to my friend, “We don’t really have any of that in the Mennonite church.” She almost interrupted me in her halting (at the time) English: “Doesn’t matter. Same Jesus.”

Father Lukas told me that some day, when the war is over, I must come to Syria to visit. One of my Syrian friends hollered out loudly from the back of the room that he was coming too. He’s talked to me before about wanting to show me his home. I can think of few trips that I would rather make.

At the end of the evening, Father Lukas presented our church with a gift. It was a plaque with a picture of Jesus and Mary on either side of an Orthodox cross, with the text of the Lord’s Prayer in Aramaic underneath. After this, he led our Syrian friends in a sung version of this prayer, in Aramaic, the language of the same Jesus that unites us and calls us friends and brothers and sisters.

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