Forced to flee!

On a recent visit to Thailand, a Release Potential team met a refugee family from Pakistan and heard how they had been forced to flee persecution. All names in this report have been changed to protect their identities.

Christian couple ‘Amal’, a midwife, and her husband ‘Rahim’, a doctor, lived with their three teenage children in Pakistan. Over the years the family witnessed repeated Islamist extremist attacks which made them feel very vulnerable as Christians in a predominantly Muslim country.

Rahim, together with his brother, owned a clinic which was both his workplace and his brother’s home. One day extremists attacked and completely destroyed the clinic. Rahim’s brother feared for his life and so he fled to America to find a place of safety and refuge. Four months after the clinic was destroyed, Rahim and his family also took the difficult decision to flee because they could no longer bear the attacks. The family fled to Thailand with nothing and are now awaiting resettlement by the UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

Amal, Rahim and the children are a close-knit family and their love for Jesus radiates from them. Neither Amal nor Rahim are allowed to work while they await resettlement and so they are establishing new daily routines for the family, ensuring that there is structure and order in their one-bedroom apartment. Amal shows her children how to become homemakers and to serve Jesus through the skills they have. Both parents have been teaching the children to cook and the whole family participate in meal preparations.

Amal is a shining example of God’s love despite the difficult situation in which they now live. She does her best to encourage and teach her children God’s word, and as a family they have a daily devotional time together. The Release Potential team were invited to share in this special time and the eldest daughter prayed with heart-felt passion. It was humbling for the team to see that, despite being forced out of her homeland by persecution and becoming a refugee, the eldest daughter is growing in her faith and wishes to serve God.

Release’s partner in Thailand works with Christians who have fled persecution in their homelands, but now struggle to survive in Thailand. The refugees are forbidden from working, many don’t speak Thai, and so they are incredibly isolated. After a month of living in Thailand, entire refugee families can be arrested and crammed into cages, forcing them to live in filthy conditions at the Immigration Detention Centre. There they wait to be recognised officially by the UN as refugees so that they can resettle in a country where they will be safe and rebuild their shattered lives.

Imagine what it takes to leave your career, relatives, home and friends. Amal and Rahim must have been truly desperate; please use the prayer points on page 4 to pray for them and others.
Release Women –
the first ten years

In this edition of Embrace we are looking back over ten years of Release’s ministry to persecuted women as well as looking ahead to the next ten years.

‘I will give you hidden treasures, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.’
(Israel 43:3 NIV)

This was the scripture that was central to our first heart2heart conference at St Michael’s Church, Chester Square, London. Little did the planning team of one Release staff member and three volunteers realise what would be born from that day in October 2007!

Margaret, a longstanding volunteer for Release and Release Women, brought the scripture above to the conference and shared how each of our persecuted sisters are the Lord’s treasures. Each is known by name by Him, even if they feel unseen and unheard in the situation in which they find themselves.

At the same conference Selam, from a partner organisation Release Eritrea, shared about the situation for Christians in Eritrea and in particular the story of a gospel singer named Helen Berhane who had spent over two years in prison in Eritrea for her faith. Everyone was moved, many to tears. The prayers were heart-felt and full of compassion. For the first time for many of those gathered, they felt connected with their suffering sisters in a deep and real way.

From that conference began what is now known as Release Women. Over the years since we have continued to host heart2hearts around the country including in Newtownabbey, Wrexham, Norwich, Glasgow and many others. With these events grew deeper connections with our persecuted sisters. One faithful supporter, Sue, picked up a lavender bag with a picture of Asia Bibi attached at a heart2heart in 2009. Sue has prayed for Asia, a Christian mother on death row in Pakistan, every day since as she looks at her photo at home.

Prayer has been our foundation over the past ten years and we have explored different creative ways to enable us all to understand what our sisters are going through. One memorable prayer session was spent in the basement of a church huddled between stone arches illuminated only by candles, to pray specifically for those in prison. People were weeping as they left, having made a deep connection with a sister or brother suffering imprisonment.

Fundraising for international projects has formed another important part of our work and we always aim to keep the ‘fun’ in fundraising! Through your many and varied activities and faithful giving, around £10,000 a year is now contributed to Release Women’s Strength to Stand (S2S) groups in Pakistan and Egypt and other Release projects. We have shared many times about the amazing difference these projects are making to the lives of women and their communities. One of these women is ‘Rehana’ (not her real name) in Pakistan. She is a member of the ‘Roshni’ S2S group. She is just 20 years old and longs to know God more. She cannot read properly, but while she was attending the group she felt a thirst for God’s word and now she tries to read the Bible. In a recent prayer request to a prayer group in Bedford she asked that they pray for her so that she can read properly and so know God more deeply.

The highlight for many connected with Release Women has been travelling overseas to meet our suffering sisters face-to-face and connect with them in person. On your behalf, they have sat and listened to our sisters, wept, hugged, prayed, worshipped together and shared the love of Jesus with them – heart to heart, woman to woman.

So whether you have travelled overseas, attended an event, held an Esther Experience event, crocheted crosses, sewn beautiful hearts to give out on trips, written cards of encouragement, have quietly attended prayer meetings, or just engaged with the contents of Embrace over this past decade, thank you for being part of Release Women’s story of love for our persecuted family.
Walking with our sisters into the next ten years

So, what might lie ahead for Release Women and our sisters in the next ten years? There are only two things that we can be absolutely sure of: God is on the throne and we are closer to the coming of our Lord. Jesus spoke to his disciples warning them:

‘You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places… Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.’

(Matthew 24: 6-9 NIV)

You may have heard reported that there are over 60 million people living as displaced people or refugees around the world. That includes our brothers and sisters fleeing persecution: from Pakistan to Thailand, like Amal and Rahim featured on the front cover; from Eritrea to Libya; from Nigeria to the UK; from Syria to Turkey. Christians flee because of war and because the weapons of persecution have changed. Militant Islamists do not give our Christian family a chance to ‘stand firm in the storm’ because they will more than likely kill them. This could be an increasing trend over the next ten years and women are particularly vulnerable in situations where their family and community cannot protect them.

We need to find new ways to come alongside Christian women in these circumstances and your prayers and support are vital to help us to build partnerships and to plan.

More Christian women are affected by persecution for the simple reason that there are more women in worshipping communities. This is a global pattern reflected in all our churches. But we hope that the severity of women’s suffering will not increase. At the Leuven consultation on Christian Women living under Pressure in June 2017 Dr Susan Kerr spoke about the ‘weaponisation of women’s bodies’. The risk of abuses such as trafficking, slavery or forced marriage and rape for Christian women significantly increases when women are forced to migrate to camps where so many young male refugees are being radicalised by Islamic militants.

We can look forward to good news though! S2S groups are increasing! They continue to address the needs of women, their families and communities. With your help we continue to support the groups in Pakistan and Egypt. Our desire is to begin different programmes in other countries in the coming years. This includes increasing our ministry with widows, female prisoners of faith and prisoners’ wives. We hope to continue our collaboration with other organisations; partners and networks which will surely increase our effectiveness and help to build the church.

S2S groups encourage men and women to learn to listen to and respect one another and our partners note significant changes in behaviour and attitudes. We hope to see more evidence of that over these coming years as the effect of S2S groups grows, for which we praise God.

So yes, Jesus warns us about the end times but equally the Apostle Paul reassures the Roman church as they live under pressure for their faith:

‘…but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.’

(Romans 5: 3-5 NIV)

The sufferings of our sisters are sacrificial and deeply painful, yet are part of reflecting the broken body of Christ on earth. May they know more and more that we are with them, praying and weeping through sadness and rejoicing in their joys.
Editorial

Dear sisters in Christ,

What a privilege it is to be part of Release Women. I can hardly believe ten years have passed since the first conference. From small acorns, great oak trees grow and I feel it is just so with this ministry because God is in control. When I look back over the past ten years I remember many good, happy and pleasant times, with great blessings from God. Yet on the other hand I have had a great deal of sadness and many unhappy times. Does that sound like your last ten years? I am certain it does.

We all suffer in our own way, yet it is with a heavy heart that I think of those who have been incarcerated for the whole of the past ten years or even longer. Consider our sisters and brothers who are still in prison in Eritrea! Their past ten years have been absolutely terrible. They will have had barely enough to eat, endured extreme conditions, and many will have been beaten and abused.

As we look through this edition of Embrace we can yet again see how women especially have been marginalised for their faith around the world over the past ten years and sadly it is still continuing.

However, our hope is in knowing that our Lord Jesus will return for His church. It is that day that our persecuted sisters are looking and waiting for; when all their suffering will be over and they can reign with our Lord forever.

Meanwhile we can all do what the Lord would have us do. The Apostle Peter tells us in 1 Peter 4:10 to use the gifts we have to serve others. I often wonder what I will be doing on that awesome day when Jesus returns but when I read that scripture I know what the Lord wants me and all of us to be doing. Can I encourage all of us to get busy about His business?

Thank you all for all the work you have done during these years for our sisters in Christ. Let’s press on for Him into the next ten years!

Blessings

Wendy

Prayer Points

‘Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.’ (1 Peter 4:10)

Please pray for those fleeing persecution:
- That they may make their way safely to freedom.
- For Amal and Rahim, that they will be accepted in their place of refuge and can be resettled soon.
- That they will be allowed to work to become part of the community and to be able to support their family.
- For their eldest daughter and the rest of the children to continue to serve the Lord.

Please pray for Release Women:
- Praise the Lord for the work that has already taken place over the past ten years.
- Ask the Lord to help, guide and give strength to the whole Release Women team.
- That new ways will be found to connect women in the UK and Ireland with their suffering sisters.
- For more S2S groups to be established.

Please pray for our sisters who continue to face persecution:
- For those who are displaced to be able to move to a new place to live.
- For the S2S groups, that through them many women will be able to stand firm in adversity and persecution.
- That women will continue to show Jesus’ love to their families and communities, even in the most difficult of situations.
- For protection for vulnerable women at risk of abuse.

Follow us on Facebook www.facebook.com/ReleaseWomen

Please give

Please make a gift if you can. It’s the generosity of people like you that enables us to help people like those you’ve read about in this edition of Embrace. You can give by using the response card inside this letter or by contacting our Supporter Relations Team (contact details below).

The International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church (IDOP) in the UK and Ireland takes place on Sunday, November 19. However, why not dedicate the whole of November as a month of prayer for persecuted believers? Resources are available on our website.

If you no longer wish to receive Embrace, please phone or email our Supporter Relations Team (see contact details) and ask to be removed from the mailing list.

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