



Embrace

Newsletter of Release Women
Spring 2020

Sabina Wurmbrand

A spirit of boldness!

**Imagine trying to run a small hospital all by yourself!
On a recent visit to Nigeria, Release International's
Kenneth Harrod met a woman who did just that.**

That was the impossible situation faced by Comfort Mark a few years ago. Comfort was a nurse in a small private hospital in northern Nigeria. 'In those days Boko Haram weren't killing women,' Comfort explained.

Then repeated local attacks on the hospital and threats by the Islamist group forced staff members to flee the area – including all the male doctors. Only Comfort was left! 'I was the only person going in to the hospital for two whole months. I tried to care for needy people as best I could.'

That experience prompted Comfort to set up a small minority interest rights group to be, as she puts it, 'a voice for the voiceless'. She now has some lawyers assisting her. 'We are doing what we can to prevent girls from being abducted. We are also discipling



Comfort Mark

young Christians to stand strong in their faith.'

Release International staff met Comfort at a conference being run by one of our partners. Around 200 pastors and other church leaders were at the two-day event, aimed at encouraging and fortifying those living and serving the Church in the north-east of Nigeria.

Those attending heard updates, particularly on the current situation in Borno State, had some basic training in both Christian apologetics and security awareness, and had opportunities to work together on strategies for future gospel ministry in what is one of the most dangerous parts of Nigeria for Christians.

In recent years many churches in the north-east have been destroyed, hundreds of Christians have been killed and many more forced to flee. Large numbers of Christians now live on IDP (Internally Displaced Person) camps in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. There they are forced to rely on practical support from charities. Venturing out of Maiduguri to farm land is extremely dangerous.

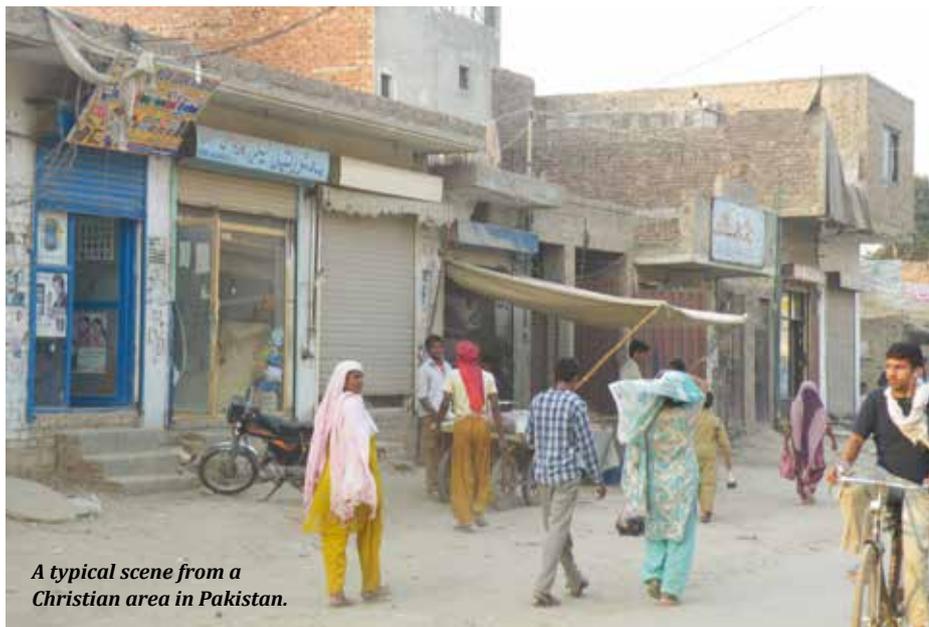
Comfort very much enjoyed her time at the conference and was encouraged to continue in the work she now feels called to, supporting Christian women and girls and being involved in Christian gospel outreach. 'We give God the glory,' she said. The hospital where Comfort has worked now has 12 full-time staff working again. 'I simply want to continue working for God,' she said. 'God has given me a spirit of boldness. If He wants to take me, it is to His glory. For to me to live is Christ; to die is gain.'



Release Women: Connecting Christian women in the UK and Ireland with their suffering sisters around the world.

'She's our daughter now!'

As a teenager, Nadeema* should have been enjoying life with her friends, working hard at school and dreaming of plans for her future. But as a 14-year-old girl from a Christian family in Pakistan, Nadeema was working as a housemaid in a Muslim home, while living with her aunt and cousins.



A typical scene from a Christian area in Pakistan.

It soon became clear that Nadeema was not receiving any payment for the work she was doing and so the aunt approached the Muslim family to ask why her niece was not being paid for her hard work. Their response was that Nadeema now belonged to their family and as such, they did not have to pay for her labour. The aunt disputed this. She looked after Nadeema; she belonged to her family. If she wasn't to be paid for her work, she wouldn't work! However, as happens too often in situations like this, Nadeema was 'married off' by the Muslim family to a cleric and so forcibly converted to Islam.

Nadeema's story could have ended there, except for her courageous and tenacious aunt, who applied for a court order to have her niece returned to her. The judge ordered the police to bring Nadeema to court. When the judge saw her, he ruled that because of her young age, she was to be returned to her aunt, who took her home.

The Muslim family, however, refused to accept the judge's decision and threatened Nadeema's aunt and her family. According to them, Nadeema was a wife and a Muslim and if the aunt did not return Nadeema to her Muslim 'family', they would take Nadeema by force and the aunt's own daughter, Nadeema's cousin Zenab*, would be taken by them as well.

What a dreadful situation for Nadeema, her aunt and her 22-year-old cousin Zenab to be in – through no fault of their own. A situation brought about because they are living as Christian minorities in a predominantly Muslim society.

It was clear that in this case the only option was for the girls to flee the country. Zenab's brother agreed to act as a guardian for Nadeema and as a chaperone for both the girls, so that they could leave Pakistan, accompanied by him. The three of them met Release

contacts in another country, where the girls will have the right to apply for asylum.

We rejoice that in the short-term, both Nadeema and Zenab are safe. We rejoice in the courage of the aunt and in her persistence in standing up for justice, despite the risk to herself and her own daughter. We rejoice that the brother acted with integrity in chaperoning the girls to safety and that there is the hope of a new life for Nadeema and Zenab, free from oppression and persecution, where they can live and worship without fear.

But there is much to pray for, not just for Nadeema and Zenab, but for the aunt who is now without her daughter and her niece. Please use the prayer points on the back page to guide your prayers.

Building resilience

Sadly, terrible though this story is, it is not unusual. Young Christian girls in countries such as Pakistan are vulnerable to this sort of persecution. As we reported in the Summer 2019 edition of *Embrace*: 'As Christian women they face marginalisation and injustice, such as the lack of access to a good education. This often results in poor employment opportunities and economic well-being, with Christian communities frequently living in poverty.' The article went on to report on some creative vocational training which had taken place with some of the women in the Strength to Stand (S2S) groups, which many of you support, in Pakistan. These groups help to build resilience to economic oppression, by giving the women the skills to start small businesses or micro enterprises, but also to build resilience to persecution, by helping them to understand their identity in Christ and to develop their faith in Him. The S2S groups help to reduce the need for girls like Nadeema to work as maids in Muslim households by giving them the means to be more financially independent.

We're delighted to report, on the next page, on the second stage of creative training that took place with women from the S2S groups, late last year, led by Jane from a Christian arts ministry in the UK, working with our partner in Pakistan.

**All names have been changed for security purposes.*

Sowing seeds of love

'We must not forget to look at the overall impact [of the training] and the importance of changing one life at a time. There is no price tag on sowing seeds of love.'

These were Jane's words as she reflected on the second stage of creative training with some of the women from the Strength to Stand (S2S) groups in Pakistan. Jane and her colleague from a UK Christian arts ministry returned there late last November, excited to see how the women had progressed since the previous training in March. There were some familiar faces and some new ones, but 17 women met together over three weeks to receive part two of the creative training, designed to give them skills to provide an opportunity to escape from poverty, to release talents, to build self-worth and to receive hope for the future. Ten of the women were illiterate, although some said they had received a little schooling; lack of education is just one example of the challenges they face. But Jane was pleased to see that their creative talents outweighed their inability to read and write!

Each day, training started with a time of worship and prayer, with Jane and her colleague sharing with the women what God had laid on their hearts for them. God gave them pictures and illustrations about a garden. Jane explains: 'The training represented each person receiving a packet of seeds to plant and grow their own garden. In the centre of the garden was a Tree of Life (representing Christ). The women were encouraged always to invite, and keep, Jesus in the centre of their lives and the centre of their new creative venture.' Jane shared with the women the story of the parable of the talents; we can either use the gifts God has given us or disregard them and leave them unused.

A new range of papercraft items were prepared for this training, using cardboard, magazines and old



Hania and Soraya* proudly displaying their crafts.*

newspapers. A local source of all the materials used was located during the visit, which is so important for the future sustainability of the crafts. During the training, each woman made a round mirror, a cross, a journal and a picture frame or a rectangular mirror. As many creative businesses fail due to the lack of variety of marketable goods, the women were able to learn how to make a large range of items from designs which could easily be made into a wide assortment of colours and styles.

As before, it took a lot of determination for the women to attend the training, leaving their homes very early in the morning to travel for two hours or more in three-wheeler 'tuk tuks' on unmade roads. They worked hard each day and Jane was thrilled that the results were of such a high standard! Often the women did not want to stop at the end of the day to go home.

The third week was devoted to business training, presented in pictorial form so that everyone could understand and engage in group work together. When asked for feedback on the business training, Fatima* said, 'I learned how to deal with customers and to know about their needs, what they want and how I can meet their requirements.' Another said, 'I learned how to promote our work and business. I feel confident in myself that we can do this.' To enable the women to start to put into practice what they have learned, six micro enterprise groups

have been formed and they have all been given a starter kit of essential materials and equipment.

On the final day of the training, the women wore their best clothes as part of the celebration of their achievements. Jane and her colleague prayed for each group of women and for the future of their micro enterprise, praying through the vision of the garden and the parable of the talents.

The creative training was always supposed to be vocational to help to open doors of opportunity to the women. It is clear that it has done that, and the standard of the work produced speaks for itself. But the training has achieved much more than that, as these comments from the women demonstrate: 'This work is very good for us as we can do it at home... I think at night my dream will become true.' 'I enjoyed starting the day with worship the most.' 'I really appreciate your sacrifice, that you left your homes to come to the Christian women and the Christian community to support us... I really enjoyed the spiritual atmosphere in the training.' The training has brought the women closer to Jesus; has given them self-worth, confidence, encouragement, hope and above all, has sown the seeds of love.

**All names have been changed for security purposes.*



Work in progress.



The finished product!

Editorial

Dear sisters in Christ,

As I look out of my window, I can see the daffodils, snowdrops and crocuses pushing their shoots above the ground. What a privilege it is to be able to watch them grow every day. We often forget the wonder of creation that is going on around us as we are busy with our daily lives. How blessed we are to be able to contact and visit our families and friends whenever we want. How privileged we are to be able to pick up our Bible at any time of the night or day, to read God's word and freely discuss what we have read with anyone, without any fear of persecution.

How different it is for our sisters who are living under persecution or in a prison cell. Unable, in some cases, to see outside, not able to breathe in the fresh air, not able to visit or contact their families when they want. Unable to do the simple things of life that we often take for granted. As we consider their circumstances and read their stories in *Embrace*, I am certain you often wonder, as I do, what can be done to help them. We can pray, tell others, raise funds; the list is endless when we start to really think about it.

One of the ways to encourage others to learn about our sisters is to hold a 'Sabina Supper,' which incorporates all these ideas, especially raising much-needed funds. It also introduces the work of Release to those who are unaware of it. It does not have to be an elaborate meal – a simple meal will do, sandwiches and cakes or a themed meal, maybe a curry or a selection of different foods from different countries. Why not take a look at the Release website where you will find further information about hosting a 'Sabina Supper' and arrange one yourself? It's not difficult and the Supporter Relations Team (SRT) is always on hand to help and support you. However you help, it will be greatly appreciated.

Finally, may I also encourage you to sign up for the monthly Release Women email; this will help you as you pray for our sisters. Just contact the SRT who will be very pleased to get you signed up.

Every blessing,

Wendy

Prayer Points



'In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.'

2 Timothy 3v12 (NIV)

Please pray for Comfort:

- That the Lord will continue to encourage her in her hospital work.
- That her faith will remain strong even when under pressure.
- That she can expand her work with the Christian women and girls.
- That the work will be successful in stopping girls being abducted.

Please pray for Nadeema and Zenab:

- That Nadeema and Zenab will settle into their new life, free from oppression and persecution.
- Praise God that they can now live and worship freely.
- For the aunt and cousin to be kept safe in God's care.
- That they will both be quickly allowed asylum in their new country.

Pray for the women from the S2S group:

- That the women will continue with the work and not become discouraged.
- That they will keep on praying and growing in faith.
- That they will sell their products and in doing so contribute to the family income.
- That they will be able to continue to meet together and encourage each other.

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NOTICEBOARD

THE DAY OF THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Monday, June 29, 2020

We invite you and your church to join us in remembering modern-day Christian martyrs, and their families, on or around June 29. A resource pack will be available to order in April.



Listen!

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HOST A 'SABINA SUPPER'



If Wendy has inspired you to host a Sabina Supper, download more information at releaseinternational.org/sabina-suppers/

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