

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JAN-MAR 2024

voice

of Persecuted Christians

HELPING
CHRISTIANS
IN FLIGHT

Elite soldier's
fiery trial

*North Korean's
dramatic journey
to faith*

Persecution
Trends 2024

*Where Christians face
greatest hostility*

Strength to
Stand in Egypt

*How your support
helps the poorest
believers*

*News, stories and prayer requests
from persecuted Christians around the world*



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

**Learning from
Christians
forced to flee**

Many of us at this point in the calendar take the opportunity to reflect on the past 12 months and to look forward to the coming year. There will have been highs and lows for all of us and no doubt will be again but it's unlikely we will experience the sort of dramatic events that Dmitry underwent (see pages 6-9).

This brave Ukrainian pastor was captured and interrogated by Russian invaders then forced from his homeland yet has continued to serve the persecuted faithful believers still living there. His dedication and perseverance are great examples for us to follow in our own lives and as we go through our own trials.

One of the aims of Release International is to help UK Christians learn from the persecuted part of the church. I believe that stories such as Dmitry's provide precisely the lessons we need to hear in the UK. In the midst of his interrogation, Dmitry said he 'had no fear' but experienced a supernatural peace. We may wonder how we will get through challenges that may sometimes seem to overwhelm us but let's draw comfort and inspiration from knowing that that same peace and freedom from fear is ours too. If God is able to provide peace and freedom from fear in a very tangible way in very difficult circumstances in Ukraine then He is able to do so in the UK.

TRENDS 2024

At the start of every year we publish a survey undertaken with partners detailing current

persecution and the trends reflected therein.

In this year's report (pages 12-18) we have again included prayers for our brothers and sisters in each of the specific countries highlighted. After reading each section please do take time to pray for our persecuted family. We may not see immediate results but we know that prayer changes situations. We hope that by providing this key information from our partners it will enable you not only to pray with far greater understanding of ongoing events but also to pray pre-emptively, knowing what could be on the horizon for already persecuted believers.

CAN YOUR CHURCH HOST DRAMA?

We have been hugely encouraged by the growing response in the UK to the Artless Theatre Company production of Petr Jasek's story of imprisonment in Sudan (see page 21). The tour is now entering its third calendar year and reaching fresh audiences. *Premier Christianity* magazine described it as a 'production bursting with artistic imagination on a level I have rarely experienced before'. If you haven't had a chance yet to attend a performance of *If Prison Walls Could Speak* may I encourage you to do so. It will not be wasted time. May I also encourage you to think about hosting a performance at your own church. I believe it has had a profound impact on audiences, challenging and inspiring Christians to go deeper in their faith. Think what it might do for those in your congregation and beyond.

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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

voice

of Persecuted Christians

Release helps Christians in the UK and Ireland to actively engage with their persecuted brothers and sisters around the world: praying with them, standing with them, helping them, and learning lessons of true Christian discipleship with them.

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Faith under fire

More Christians killed in village attacks

Fulani herdsmen and other terrorists are understood to have killed seven more Christians in attacks on two villages in Plateau state, Nigeria, at the end of November.

According to sources, the attackers raided Puka and Dinter villages in Mangu County in the early hours of November 30.

One resident told Morning Star News in a text message: *'Fulani herdsmen together with a group of bandits attacked two of our villages, Puka and Dinter, where they killed seven of our Christian villagers. Many other Christians were injured and are currently being treated for gunshot wounds and machete cuts.'*

The day before, a pastor and two other Christians were kidnapped in the predominantly Christian Raddi village, Bassa County, a resident said in a text message.

The three Christians were rescued later that evening in neighbouring Bauchi state in a police response to another kidnapping attempt in Toro County, local press reported.

A few days earlier suspected Fulani herdsmen and other terrorists attacked villages in Taraba state, killing at least 10 Christians, sources said. One resident said the militants shot at anyone they saw.

(Source: Morning Star News)

NIGERIAN CHURCH PLAGUED BY KILLING AND KIDNAP EPIDEMIC

Believers prove soft target for abduction



Archbishop Ben Kwashi said the aim of the kidnappers was to impoverish the church

New reports highlight the growing kidnap crisis in Nigeria, where Christians are regarded as soft targets for abduction.

Last year a report by UK parliamentarians heard that almost 90 per cent of all the Christians kidnapped worldwide were abducted in Nigeria.

According to the charity Aid to the Church in Need 5,200 Christians were kidnapped in Nigeria between January 2021 and June 2022. And last year,

by mid-November, 23 clergy and church workers had been abducted and several murdered.

On November 17 it was reported that kidnappers killed a pastor after receiving a 1m naira ransom payment from his church. Morning Star News reported that the Rev David Musa, of ECWA church in Lokoja County, was killed after being held for three days. He was shot dead after the agreed ransom had been paid.

'Through an epidemic of kidnapping and murder, terrorists are forcing Christians from their homes in an attempt to Islamise the north. And increasingly, they are turning their attention further south,' said Paul Robinson, CEO of Release International.

A new report by International Christian Concern claims more than 500 Christians were killed in 55 attacks over a four-month period to July.

ICC wrote: *'Christians experience a disproportionate share of the killings and kidnappings. Nigeria has become a burial ground for believers of the Christian faith [and] is arguably the most dangerous place to be a Christian in the world today.'*

Their findings were supported by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The APPG heard that 'more Christians are killed for their faith in Nigeria than in the rest of the world combined'.

'All these reports confirm that Nigeria has become the kidnap capital of the world – and Christians are being targeted in an attempt to drive them off their lands,' said Mr Robinson.

'Some of these attacks can be put down to banditry and lawlessness, others are the singling out of Christian leaders and their communities. Thousands of Christians have been killed or abducted in recent years. These moves are designed to drive Christians from their villages and create a climate of fear.'

According to Lagos-based research group SBMIntel the recent wave of abductions had led to ransom payouts amounting to 302m naira (£288,000).

Release International partner and former Archbishop of Jos, Benjamin Kwashi, said the abduction epidemic began with Boko Haram kidnapping schoolgirls and killing Christians.

'Today, the terror groups include Fulani herdsmen killers and a criminal element whose main business is to kidnap for ransom. They kidnap mainly pastors, worshippers on Sundays and children of influential Christians. The aim is to make sure the church is terribly poor and impoverished.'

(Source: Morning Star News)

Listen to our latest podcasts



NO PLACE FOR EVANGELICAL FAITH The war in Ukraine has been prominent in our news headlines over the last year, but how has this conflict impacted Christians there? In the first of a two-part conversation, we speak to Maciek from our sister ministry, Voice of the Persecuted Christians, Poland. VoPC Poland has been working to support evangelical Christians living in the occupied areas of Ukraine where life has become extremely challenging in recent times.

WHERE FAITH IS VULNERABLE Last August mob attacks on Christian homes and churches in Pakistan hit the news headlines around the world. In this edition of Release International's Voice podcast we speak to former staff member Imtiaz, who recently visited the area and met those who lived through that ordeal. Listen as he reflects on this and on the broader needs of the church in Pakistan, and hear how you can stand with our brothers and sisters there in prayer.

FAITHFUL WHERE WE ARE North Korea is a country that fascinates many of us – not least because it seems so secretive. What is life like there? What's it like being a Christian in North Korea? In this edition of Release International's Voice podcast we continue our conversation with Eric Foley, head of our sister ministry, Voice of the Martyrs Korea. Last month Eric spoke about his ministry – and how it was transformed by listening to, and understanding, North Korean Christians. Listen now as Eric suggests how we are to view and pray for our North Korean brothers and sisters in Christ.

CHRIST IS SUFFICIENT The first of two podcast conversations with Eric Foley, of Voice of the Martyrs Korea. In his letter to the Colossians the Apostle Paul emphasises that our sufficiency is in Christ alone, 'for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and [we] have been filled in him'. And yet Paul speaks of his sufferings. In this edition of Release International's Voice podcast we speak to Eric Foley, head of our sister ministry, Voice of the Martyrs Korea. What does ministry to North Korean Christians look like – and how did Voice of the Martyrs Korea begin?

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Religious hatred 'motivated murder' in Pakistan



Farhan Ul Qamar Photo: Morning Star News (courtesy of family)

The father of a 20-year-old Christian who was gunned down in Pakistan said the confessed killer was driven by a strong hatred for Christians and Jews.

Farhan Ul Qamar died after being shot in his house in Talwandi Inayat Khan village in Punjab Province in the presence of other family members. Farhan's father, Noor Ul Qamar, said the killer showed hatred for Christians and Jews, mistakenly referring to the family as Jews as he ranted at them.

Noor Ul Qamar said he was unsure why the man targeted his son in particular, though the killer and Farhan had had a minor argument the previous day. In the early hours of November 9 the killer held the family hostage at gunpoint for nearly 40 minutes, refusing to let them go near their fatally injured son, Ul Qamar said.

'My son was struggling for his life, bleeding profusely from the bullet wounds, but his murderer did not allow us to even give him some water, let alone comfort him,' Ul Qamar told Morning Star News. *'He repeatedly called us "Jews" as he cursed and waved his weapon at us. We all watched helplessly, pleading with him to leave, but he wouldn't go.'*

Eventually the attacker fled on his motorcycle. Farhan died on his way to the hospital.

The killer had never hidden his hatred for Christians, but his behaviour worsened after the Israel-Gaza war started, Ul Qamar said.

(Source: Morning Star News)

Sunday service turns into communist party performance

An officially recognised church in northeast China transformed a Sunday worship service into praise for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the country, ChinaAid reported.

The 'service' took place in compliance with a newly passed 'Patriotic Education Law'.

In the name of using literature and arts performances to promote excellent traditional culture in churches, the church featured a song titled *Ode to the Motherland*, composed by one of the church's pastors. It also brought together various art groups to celebrate the CCP and its rule.

According to the Gospel Times, a Chinese website that has long reported on the activities of officially recognised churches, on November 19, a Sunday morning, on the eve of the implementation of the Patriotic Education Law, the Liaozhong District Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the Christian Council in Shenyang City, Liaoning Province, China, held a sermon and praise gathering at the Liaozhong Christian Church. The event was themed 'The Practice of the Sinicization of Religion, Introduction of Excellent Traditional Culture into the Church, Calligraphy and Painting, Literature and Art Performances.'

The Patriotic Education Law was passed on October 24. It formally includes Chinese youth and children, Chinese citizens, residents of Hong Kong and even overseas Chinese, among others, as subjects of patriotic education. The law aims to promote the spirit of patriotism, widely seen as a further consolidation of the personality cult around President Xi Jinping.

(Source: ChinaAid)



'We hate Americans, evangelicals and Nazis – and you are all three!'

Pastor Dmitry, who faced interrogation at the hands of Russian invaders displaying the same mindset as their communist forebears, was forced to escape Ukraine but continues to minister to underground believers there. Kenneth Harrod heard him share his inspirational story

Church leader Dmitry is familiar with fleeing from Russian persecution of Christians. During the course of his life it has happened not once, not twice – but on three occasions.

The first of these was as a young man, when his family fled from the former Soviet Union. Years later, as a pastor, he was forced to leave the Crimea

when the Russians took over that part of Ukraine. Last year it happened again, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine saw him once again suffering for his evangelical faith.

Although the communist regime of the old Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, Dmitry sees the same mindset among the Russian invaders today. 'In communism the mindset is

that there is no value in human life: it's all about the country. Humans are just instruments to build something great. Evangelical theology is different: it's about human life because Jesus died for you and me; not for a building or an organisation. He's not building a structure. He came to save people.

'Everywhere where communists are there is always a problem for the evangelical church,' he said. 'They always want to take the Word of God from you. They want to control, even though they try to be your friend and convince you they care for you.'

Dmitry describes himself as a fifth-generation Christian. His great-grandfather played a leading role



Dimitry, pictured with his wife, Helen, has experienced Russian persecution on three separate occasions in his life yet continues to serve an underground network of churches in Ukraine
© Release International 2024

in organising a Baptist church movement in Ukraine and south Russia. But when communism took over life became difficult.

'Lenin initially thought Christians were an asset; but eventually realised Christians were a problem. It was a difficult time under the Soviet Union; many people were killed. Christians were frequently targeted most because they always think freely: because they know the truth that sets you free. Communism is not just political: it is more of a religion – but a religion that hates God and his Son, Jesus Christ.'

He recalls as a youth, back in the 1980s, Christians having to write out parts of the Bible and other valued

Christian books by hand. Getting a Bible was difficult – and dangerous. *'They [the communists] didn't want us to read the Bible, because the Bible can change your life. They were afraid of this,'* he said.

Dimitry's father was interrogated by the KGB on a number of occasions, because of his Christian faith. Eventually the family fled from the USSR as religious refugees in 1989 and ended up in the United States. The family had no paperwork and no money and as a young man Dimitry lived for eight years without any passport, until he received US citizenship.

Having studied theology in America he felt a calling to go back to Ukraine. His friends thought he was crazy to do so, and he expected that it would be for a relatively short time. That was 30 years ago!

'We established 58 churches in Ukraine. Eventually I took pastoral charge of a church in Crimea which was having some problems. Then, in 2014 the Russians came in – suddenly, quietly. Everything changed. We tried to stay there, but they said I would have to renounce my [US] citizenship. They gave us ten days to leave, so we left all of our belongings and moved to Melitopol, which is about 100km from the Crimean border. I started working with churches there.'

'Every day I thought it could be the last day of my life'

And then, in February 2022, Dimitry found himself – for the third time in his life – confronted by hostility, as the Russians began their invasion of Ukraine.

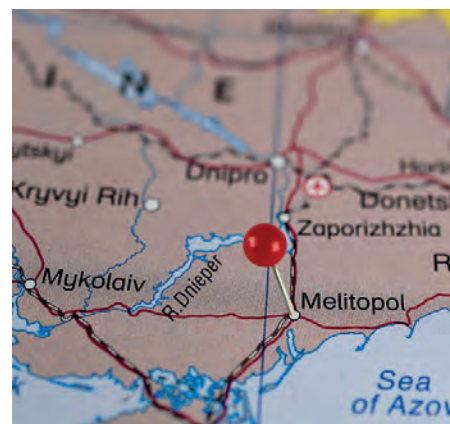
'At 5.30am rockets came to our city. We all woke up and said, "It's war." Everything changed. Within a week our city looked like Armageddon. No gas, groceries, telephone lines, internet, electricity. It was crazy: in the middle of Europe! I had a church of 500 people. I had a business. I was doing good until the Russians came to free us up! They freed us from everything. Now we are completely free – we have nothing!'

In the Russian-dominated regions of Donetsk and Luhansk Dmitry was involved in running a rehabilitation centre. *'The Russians took all of our workers there and put them in a basement. They spent almost a week there. They beat them and finally let them go, but they took the building, cars, everything.'*

In Melitopol Dmitry says there were numerous protests against the Russian invasion. *'We were praying with other ministers. In the first week they began investigating the churches and then started forbidding us to pray in the city square. They started attacking the church and arresting people.'*

On March 19 Dmitry himself was arrested. *'They came into our house at 6.30 in the morning. We saw soldiers jumping over the fence into the backyard: about 15 of them. They got into the house, separated me [from the rest of the family], took computers and everything. Then they took me to the church. They searched the building; took everything: computers, data, everything. Then they put a black bag over my head and took me away.'*

During the next few days Dmitry was interrogated on a daily basis. *'The first couple of days were really tough. In the first interrogation they told me they had a command to kill me. I said, "What for?" They replied, "First, you are working for the CIA; second, you are in charge of all the protesters in the city; third, you are supporting the Ukrainian army. You are also receiving money from other countries." I said, "Well, if you know all this, why are you asking me questions?"'*





In Melitopol there were numerous protests against the Russian invasion. Stock image

'I was interrogated every day for three or four hours. They accused me of what I could call "normal" things – like receiving money from another country. I said, "That's not illegal." They said, "It is in Russia." I said, "We're not in Russia!" They said, "We hate Americans, evangelicals and Nazis – and you are all three!"'

Dmitry spent a total of eight days in prison, in appalling conditions. *'Every time they took me for interrogation they put a bag back over my head and dragged me through the corridors. Every day I thought it could be the last day of my life.'*

'I had no fear. It was supernatural'

Although he could hear screams when other prisoners were being interrogated, Dmitry said the Lord gave him a peace in his heart during his time in custody. *'I had no fear. It was supernatural. I began witnessing to them and talked about the Bible to them. I had a sleeping bag and a Bible. They said they had watched my sermons online. I said, "Good, let's talk!"'*

The Russians eventually took over Protestant churches in the city. *'We had some large church buildings. They took all the crosses from the buildings,'* he said. *'The Russian soldiers came*

to worship services and stopped the services and took fingerprints of everyone in the congregation. Then they took the building. Our former church is now a police department.'

After his arrest Christians were praying for him and Dmitry says those prayers were answered with a miracle when he was released. However, the secret police continued coming to his home and so, for his family's safety, he made the decision to flee the country. *'When they released me from the prison they wanted information on everyone in the church; how they live. They wanted me to bring sermons to them before I preach so they could assess them,'* he said. Instead, he and his family took a journey through the Crimea to Russia and then to the Baltic states before arriving in Poland, where he now lives, working with refugees from Ukraine and Belarus. *'There are a lot of problems for Christians in Belarus as well, although you don't hear about that so much,'* he said.

From Poland Dmitry now serves and supports an underground network of churches in Melitopol where he once lived and pastored. *'We are trying to take care of those people. We have some ministers in those territories who are working with people who are still there. There is a teenage ministry*

there; and we are seeing teenagers coming to the Lord. We have a number of homegroups operating: we have about 120 people in Melitopol, meeting in homes.'

Despite the number of times in his life Dmitry has had to flee and restart life, he says he is not angry. *'I'm still happy! I'm not worrying. I am still living. But the reality is people are dying every day. The war is not finished. I have friends who have lost children. I know several pastors whose sons are dead. We bury a lot of people in Ukraine.'*

Dmitry regularly visits Ukraine from Poland and continues to be passionate about seeing people won for Christ and discipled. *'I have been working with pastors from different denominations. We need to re-evaluate our doctrine and what we are teaching. When I first had to leave because of the communists the church carried on because we had structures in place. You need to be intentional about building a culture in the church; a culture of the kingdom and of the body of Christ. We are thinking about what we are supposed to be doing in the next five years. Now is a good time to be building. The church is not to wait until the war is over; that will be too late.'*

'If people are to be changed they need Christ. Only Christ can change the problem. Until the end we will have more problems – and then Jesus will come. In the meantime we change a nation by changing a person – one by one. Our goal is not the nation; it is people.'

How to pray for Ukrainian Christians

- **Pray for Pastor Dmitry's safety as he continues to visit Ukraine from Poland**
- **Pray for strategic teaching and training of Christians in Ukraine**
- **Pray God will use the present conflict to bring many more people to saving faith in Christ**
- **Pray for the counselling ministry to Ukrainian Christians affected by the war**
- **Pray for the frontline workers, who continue to preach the gospel and disciple Christians in dangerous situations**

Supporting the church on the frontline

Through Voice of the Persecuted Christians, Poland (VOPC Poland), Release International has been supporting Christians in Ukraine suffering persecution in the current conflict.

One project provides pastoral support for those who have suffered, including pastors and their families who have been detained, interrogated, tortured and seen their churches closed down. In September VOPC Poland ran a trauma-healing retreat for a number of Ukrainian believers (pictured). These included one church leader who, in 2022, was arrested and beaten almost to death. Incredibly, when the town he had previously served in was liberated by Ukrainian forces he returned to continue his ministry!

VOPC Poland said, 'We have developed personal contacts with different pastors who have gone through persecution at the hands of



the Russian occupiers. We're sure we will have more and more contacts like that as new cities and towns are liberated. We want to stand with our persecuted Ukrainian brothers and sisters and strengthen their faith.'

A second project Release International has been supporting equips a small group of frontline Christian workers operating in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, often in the war zones. One of these workers is based in a town not far from the city of Kharkiv, which has seen heavy fighting. He said, 'Many people from our church,

especially young families with children, were forced to leave for the west of Ukraine or abroad. Some people stayed in the city. The ministers of the church organised round-the-clock prayer, which has continued without a break since the beginning of the war.

'Currently we serve the residents and those living in other settlements in the region. People come to us, whom we evangelise, feed with dinner and give humanitarian aid. This year there were 70 new people at the Easter service – 11 of whom repented and accepted Jesus.'

PLEASE HELP CHRISTIANS WHO HAVE BEEN FORCED TO FLEE PERSECUTION AND CONFLICT

These precious believers need your prayers and gifts to survive – and rebuild their lives.

Your gift could provide:

- vital food parcels
- pastoral care and Christian discipleship
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To make a gift please use the enclosed form, call 01689 823491 or give online at releaseinternational.org



*In North Korea
even statues of the
late Kim Il-Sung
and Kim Jong-Il
are venerated*



Elite soldier finds faith after a fiery trial

Ahn was a brainwashed servant of the North Korean regime but after a life-threatening drama and a desperate defection he now seeks to serve Christ and the gospel

The day Ahn sought to save a portrait of Kim Il-Sung, the communist founder of North Korea, from a fire would change his life forever. In the providence of God it became his first step on the path to finding faith in Christ.

Ahn was born into an upper-class North Korean family that had faithfully served the country's despotic Kim regime. *'I can still recall what my father told me when I was seven: "Our family is a family that has*

faithfully served the Kim family. And you, too, when you become an adult will lay down your life for the Kim family and this country."

From a young age he received what he calls brainwashing at school about allegiance to the Kim dynasty and in his teens enlisted in an elite military unit which had three responsibilities: guarding the Kim houses and yachts; carrying out assassination and terror attacks; and perpetrating cyber-attacks. After passing the necessary

tests Ahn, aged 17, joined the protection section. *'We had to take a severe oath: "As long as I am serving in this unit I will not know any secrets that I am not supposed to know. And any secrets I do know I will not share with my family. And I promise that if I break this oath I will sacrifice my life."*

Guarding the Kim yacht was an important role. During times of peace it was used for amusement, but if ever war broke out or the regime collapsed it would be used to help the Kim family flee the country.

Ahn eventually became captain of the guard in his unit but in May 2011 faced what he describes as a great trial in his life – one that he now looks back on as the providential working of God.

'I was performing my regular observations when I heard a voice shout, "Fire!" When I went in the direction of the voice I saw that a fire had broken out in the living quarters. There were over ten people sleeping

there, and they were hanging out of the window crying out, "Save us!" But the only thing I could think of was to save the portrait of Kim Il-Sung.'

(From a young age North Koreans are brainwashed to believe that the portrait is worth as much as the life of the Kim family itself. So, in the situation he found himself, rescuing a portrait on a wall became more important than saving human lives.)

Ahn retrieved the pictures, but was overcome by the smoke and flames. He lost consciousness but, as he later discovered, was saved by another soldier who entered the blazing room. He ended up spending several months in hospital where he underwent 40 surgical procedures; and during this time he admits to having felt suicidal.

Ahn was supposed to be awarded a certificate for his bravery but instead received a phone call one day from an officer asking for a bribe to receive it. *'I said, "Why are you making me pay for a certificate that I should receive?" As I began to argue with him he swore at me and said, "Do you think you are the only one who is special? Anyone in the same situation as you would have done the same thing."*

Ahn felt deeply betrayed by the regime he had served faithfully and, as a result, began to question the ideology he had held all his life. Eventually he decided to defect – a decision that, to his great surprise, his father approved of! Ahn spent six months planning and preparing to leave, including obtaining poison so that, if arrested, he could kill himself.

Then in February 2014 he and his sister began the perilous journey out of North Korea. They spent a year in China before Ahn managed to make his way to South Korea. Sadly his sister was arrested in China before she could follow him and repatriated to North Korea where she was imprisoned. She was released in 2020 but by then her health was in such a poor condition that, a year later, she died, aged just 39. Ahn said: *'Before she died she grabbed our mother's arm and said she didn't want to die. When I heard this story from my mother I felt*



Ahn, whose hands were badly burned saving a portrait of Kim Il-Sung, now follows Christ



a piercing pain in my life. I beat myself up that I was able to come to South Korea. I cried for many days.'

'God touched the scars in my heart'

After Ahn arrived in South Korea, he quickly fell into depression. However, he met members of a church and through them began attending services. *'I can remember when I met the Lord; one Friday night at a prayer meeting. I began to cry tears that I had held in for so long. God touched the scars that were in my heart.'*

'So I began to reinterpret my life in the light of the gospel. And I began to dream new dreams in the Lord and to start a new life in the Lord. I had been rejected by the North Korean government and I had lived such a meaningless life but the Lord gave me new dreams and new hopes.'

Ahn, who is now married with a young son, has enrolled at a Bible

seminary and is hopeful that one day the door will open for reunification in the Korean peninsula. *'Then I will go to preach the gospel in my home town,'* he said.

Meanwhile he wants Christians in the West to remember that God loves the people of North Korea, though they are led by a brutal dictator. *'You can forget about all of my story if you want,'* he said, *'but don't forget [the] people in North Korea. Pray for these souls whom God loves.'*

HOW OUR PARTNERS HELP

Voice of the Martyrs Korea disciples North Koreans in the Christian faith; and trains believers for ministry that includes evangelism to North Koreans in third countries, sending scripture into North Korea and radio broadcasts.

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2024

Many Christians around the world are experiencing increased persecution. Here key partners report on the pressures believers are likely to face in the next 12 months as hostile governments and militant groups seek to control and even destroy the church

The religious violence in the northeastern state of Manipur, which saw 60 killed and 50 churches destroyed, sparked candle-lit demonstrations in India and beyond



SOUTH ASIA



INDIA

During 2023 Christians experienced physical and emotional abuse and harassment of pastors and believers; destruction of church buildings; false charges and imprisonment, and the prohibition of home prayer meetings.

Most significant was the widespread ethnic violence that turned into

religious persecution in Manipur in northeast India in May, which saw 60 people killed and 50 churches burnt or destroyed.

'Minorities in the state continue to grapple with the after-effects of the ethnic and communal violence that erupted earlier this year,' said our partner.

One pastor has been unable to hold Sunday services for the past five months. In September he had to conduct services for believers over the telephone. Another church, whose premises were demolished in the May attack, no longer has a place to hold meetings. The pastor cares for his congregation by visiting them individually.

There are ongoing threats and persecution in the surrounding areas but where possible pastors continue to conduct Sunday services.

More widely across India persecution is increasing, reported our partner. *'The Hindu nationalist Government*



is complicit in all these attacks on religious minorities by Hindu fanatics,' it said.

'The national elections will be completed in May 2024 and if the current Government is re-elected, they will have even more power to act without consequence. They may change the constitution.

'[We will] continue training our workers, bolstering the courage of our believers, appealing to the governments of other nations for advocacy and sanctions.'

Thanks to the financial gifts of Release International supporters, our partners were able to help a number of Christians who experienced persecution last year:

A teenage girl from Manipur who fled the violence was taken in by our partners and provided with a new home; a Christian who was arrested on false charges of forced conversion was released after our partner's intervention, and a pastor was helped with medical care after being attacked by militants.

'We are so thankful to all the supporters and prayer partners who have made possible the helping of persecuted Christians all across India. As the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities increases dramatically with each passing month, we are thankful that we have a global network of people standing with us and our workers.'

PRAY

- That those being persecuted for their faith in Jesus would be strong and know that God is with them during their trials
- For an end to the violence and persecution in Manipur and that the state of Manipur would be able to rebuild again. Pray that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would address the issues there and intervene to stop any ongoing violence
- That those in Uttar Pradesh who have the constitutional rights to gather and worship would be safe in their efforts to follow Jesus
- Praise God that so many people are following Jesus in India through our partner's church ministry
- Pray that pastors and other workers would be faithful in their efforts to build a community of believers, and disciple those new in their faith. Pray for their health, protection and provision as well as unity in the church
- For an end to human trafficking in India which is a main source of persecution against poor and oppressed girls and women in both religious and ethnic minorities



The presence of the Taliban has caused many to flee Afghanistan

AFGHANISTAN

Christians have reportedly experienced growing persecution from their communities and extended families in the past couple of years, say our partners, who are in regular contact with Afghan believers and seekers – and that persecution is expected to continue in 2024.

This can take the form of trying to force them to recant their faith, rejecting them from the family, reporting them to local authorities or religious leaders, and sometimes threatening them with violence.

The Taliban also carry out searches of homes, as well as of people's phones, said our partner.

'As far as we are aware this is not specifically targeted at Christians, but when Bibles or Christian content are discovered on a phone they are taken into custody for questioning, sometimes being beaten or imprisoned. Many callers are fearful that their phones are being listened to and conversations recorded and ask us to contact them through other forms of media. All of this has created an environment of increasing fear and isolation. As one caller put it, "We live in fear everywhere we go."

'The fear of persecution, as well as actual persecution is increasing. Some people tell us that websites and social media sites they visit are monitored. We also hear of generally

increasing pressure to conform to a strict interpretation of the majority religion, and those not conforming increasingly stand out. We don't hear that Christians are being particularly targeted, but where they are discovered or reported by family, friends or religious leaders, we hear of increased persecution.'

In addition to this, Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries are being threatened or deported back to Afghanistan. Christians among these are extremely vulnerable especially if they were seeking asylum because of their faith. *'An Afghan migrant family in a nearby country said, "We live in fear and stress, nothing is moving with our [asylum] case. Meanwhile the authorities are searching and checking Afghan migrants. We need your prayers."*

Our partner said it was becoming increasingly difficult for even small groups of Afghan Christians to gather for worship. Several believers reported the pressure to attend a mosque, as well as some believers being detained by the authorities. They are afraid to meet in groups or draw attention to themselves, and they struggle with fear and mental trauma. One told our partner: *'As a few of us gathered, we were arrested and detained.'* There seem to be more online groups forming, but even they can be monitored.

On top of this there appears to be an increase in family or others reporting Christians or trying to get them to renounce Jesus.

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2024

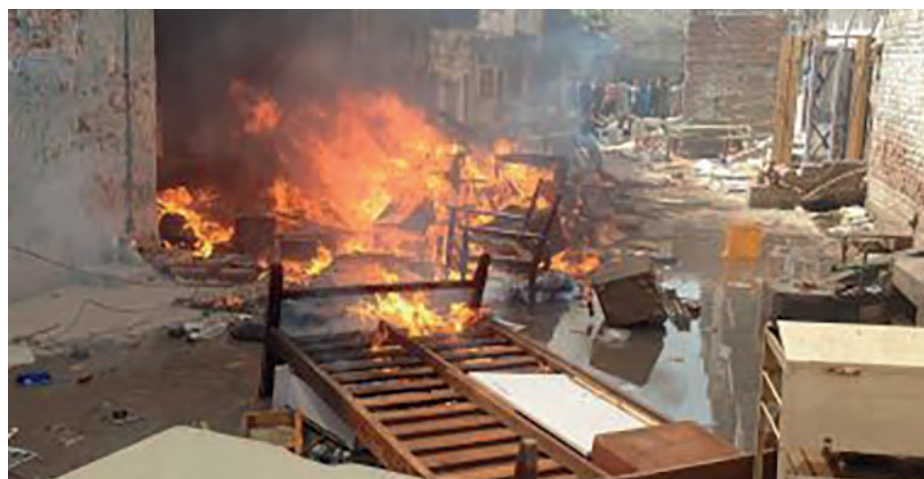
Our partner said: *'We know that our tears and pain are noticed, and we appreciate your love and concern for the persecuted body of Christ in Afghanistan. Thank you for your faithful prayers, support, and encouragement for Afghan believers in Afghanistan and those displaced to nearby countries.'*

PRAY

- For our partner's follow-up and discipleship team members who engage over the phone and on social media with Afghan believers. Listening to the problems, stresses and trauma of Afghan seekers and Christians every day can weigh them down
- For believers who depend on the daily radio, satellite-TV and online Christian programmes that help to feed and encourage them; that they can access them safely. Pray for the new radio programmes being prepared in 2024

PAKISTAN

On August 16, in Jaranwala, a violent mob burned 23 churches and 80 houses simply because of a false accusation against two brothers. This incident not only affected the Jaranwala Christian community but caused a different type of fear among believers all over Pakistan.



More than 20 churches were destroyed in a mob attack on Jaranwala Christian community in August
Photo: Aid to the Church in Need

After this incident, Christians were threatened even in remote areas of Pakistan, which went unreported in the media. In Lahore a Christian working at a hospital was dismissed just for visiting Jaranwala to see the burned churches. Incidents like this increased in August as stories of false accusations appeared every day.

On the whole, persecution is growing gradually, most notably in the rise in false cases of blasphemy, our partner said. *'Mischievous behaviour against Christians is increasing. If someone gets to know about any Christian's identity, their behavior towards that person changes.'*

'Due to the rise in persecution, Christians are losing their jobs as well. They are suffering because of their joblessness and those who are still working among the majority community fear losing their job; it is likely to remain the same in 2024. Even Christian children face bullying in schools.'

'We should keep praying for our brothers and sisters who are struggling every day.'

PRAY

- For protection for Christians especially in areas that have seen unrest such as Jaranwala
- For provision for believers particularly those who have lost jobs as a result of their faith
- That God brings more people into His kingdom through our partner's ministry

AFRICA



NIGERIA

Christians are facing another year of suffering as government complacency at a federal and local level emboldens the various Islamist terrorist groups operating in central and northeast Nigeria, our partner believes.

'Persecution continues to spread to many rural communities that have been attacked previously. Though the attacks on large communities to inflict large casualties have subsided, the persistent killing of small groups and individuals continue to spread across the central regions of southern Kaduna, Benue, Plateau and Taraba states.'

'This is because the old jihadi rule of engagement continues to play out, attacking Christian communities and dispossessing them of their lands by destroying their food supplies and forcing them to convert or flee.'

During 2023, villages and communities were persistently attacked, with more than 6,000 people estimated to have been killed by Islamist Fulani militia and other terrorists. Fulani have forced Christian villages to pay millions of naira in order not to be attacked but, even when some have paid, the terrorist groups have still raided them, especially in southern Kaduna. Christians have been kidnapped for ransom, while many farmlands were deliberately destroyed by the Fulani to force the villages to either flee or face starvation.

Our partner said the terrorist groups, which include Boko Haram, are



Release International partners provide aid for Christians displaced by the violence of militant groups such as Boko Haram

funded, encouraged and supported by various bodies both locally and internationally.

'It is therefore certain that the pressure on Christian communities will be increased and sustained.'

At the same time our partner reported that pastors who had been trained as a result of Release International support had continued evangelism in regions controlled by Boko Haram.

'We are excited to report more communities are being reached. The Lord has answered prayers for opportunity for prison evangelism for a group of our trained pastors particularly to members of Boko Haram who are in prison. We have also seen the Lord's deliverance for our travelling teams.

'We send our deepest appreciation to all those who stand with us in prayers and who support the persecuted in every way they can. We are still standing here because of your sacrifice and support.'

PRAY

- For families and victims who have suffered attacks or have been kidnapped
- For the Church to find the courage to continue missions and evangelism despite the violence against Christians

- For God to raise up godly leaders whom He will use to bring better governance in the country

ERITREA

The Eritrean Government continued to arrest Christians in 2023 while at the same time releasing others.

Among those detained were a group of 44 believers who were seized while gathering in two private homes at the start of the year.

Many Christians are held without charge and detained indefinitely. Torture and brutality are commonplace including being held in shipping containers in the desert. Many have been in prison for more than a decade.

In March police arrested 30 Christians who had gathered to worship in a home in the town of Keren, 60 miles northwest of the capital, Asmara.

At the same time nine Christian prisoners were released.

Then in April more than 100 Christian college students were arrested in Asmara after gathering to sing and record video clips for social media.

This arrest put the number of Christian prisoners at more than 500, around double the number 12 months previously.



Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel has been in prison since 2004

Our partner said that, although Christian worship gatherings were banned, the church would continue serving God underground.

Even meeting for weddings is becoming more risky as the Government tries to weaken the church in whatever way it can.

The war between Eritrea and Ethiopia has also affected the church, with some Christian leaders forced to participate in the conflict.

PRAY

- For all the Christians currently detained, often in harsh conditions. Some have been behind bars for more than a decade. Two,

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2024

pastor Haile Naizgi and Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, have been jailed since 2004. Pray that more would be released in 2024

- That God would thwart the efforts of the Government to infiltrate underground churches
- Thank God for the release of seven women and six men, all Christians, who had reportedly been in prison for about ten years. Pray they can rebuild their lives

EAST AFRICA

Persecution of Christians in this region remains severe and is expected to continue into 2024.

Our partners report that there is a small window for freedom of religion but harsh, ingrained religious beliefs and a hostility to other faiths combined with a lack of opportunity to expand their worldview means many are unwilling to listen to the gospel.

However, our partners said: *'We expect to see more coming to faith through online engagement and physical connections to fellowships,'* even though resistance may well follow.

They added that as a result more people would become disconnected from their biological families as well as their cultures. Hence, there would be an increased need for more prayer support for protection and provision as well as being connected to Christian families. They also expect an increased number of those fleeing for their lives due to persecution.

'We have come this far because of the deliberate prayers of the faithful ones. Knowing that we are one body in diverse locations, through the prayers you pray we have a sure connection and are reminded that there are parts of the body of Christ who are praying for us. Remembering that makes us bold and encourages us to keep on the journey.'



Xi Jinping continues to seek religious 'sinicization'

EASTERN ASIA



CHINA

Many churches (both registered and unregistered) have been prevented from meeting and some have been closed down. There have been many reports of Christian leaders being arrested for questioning and imprisoned on charges of national security as well as fraud. Children of Christian parents have been harassed and discriminated against and have been prevented from attending Christian meetings.

Our partner said that persecution

was increasing. *'There are tighter and more complex religious constraints, and Christians in China are facing increased harassment and persecution.'*

This was due to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopting an aggressive policy of social control and the 'securitization of everything'. Having cemented his position with a third (and unlimited) term of office, President Xi Jinping continues to seek his goal of religious 'sinicization'. This means preaching and promoting doctrines that support and comply with the CCP's leadership, ideology and values. ***'The ultimate aim is to eliminate Christianity within China altogether,'*** added our partners.

They said that in 2024 there would be increasing pressure to demonstrate total allegiance to the CCP and President Xi, above any commitment to Jesus Christ and the Bible, and to gather in official venues only, rather than in houses or premises not recognised by the Government.

Also expected is increasing censorship online, where there is a strict ban on religious content without an official licence. It will become harder for Christians in unregistered churches to obtain Bibles, as they cannot be legally sold in the Chinese marketplace, including online and on Bible apps. With the introduction of a new and

comprehensive anti-espionage law, many Christians who communicate with foreigners or foreign entities run the risk of being accused of sharing information inappropriately. A number of church leaders have already been imprisoned falsely on alleged charges of fraud.

'Please continue to pray for and encourage others to pray for Christians in China, including the Chinese diaspora who typically have not had a burden to reach out and support those in mainland China.'

'A shortage of Bibles is becoming an increasing reality, now that Bibles cannot be legally sold in China. The unregistered church has zero access to legal copies and needs help to source a minimum of 2 million copies annually for their new believers. Realistically, the need is much greater, potentially up to 20-plus million Bibles a year.'

PRAY

- For wisdom in assessing how best to continue to support China's believers (in what is perhaps the most difficult ministry context in 40 years)
- That the distribution of SD cards will continue safely and without detection
- For the best Christian resources to reach leaders and believers, which meet their needs and empower them in their Christian lives

NORTH KOREA

North Korea isolated its citizens even more during the Covid pandemic, evidenced most clearly by the erection of a second 'border wall' along the China border, but that isolation was hardly a time of national stagnation, said our partners, Voice of the Martyrs Korea (VOMK).

'North Korea went nuclear, tested missiles, continued its military parades, and carried out computer hacking at a level of sophistication and success that few nations can match. Kim Jong Un shared headlines with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.'

Even ordinary citizens used the lockdown period to their advantage, watching smuggled videos of Korean dramas, and in the case of believers, listened to Christian radio broadcasts. Daily broadcasts (including new ones added by VOMK during the daytime hours when workers would normally be away from home), digital Bibles, and Christian video content all spread rapidly. *'Only now are North Korean authorities beginning to realise and correct their omission with resumed house-to-house searches. Jamming efforts against broadcasts, including especially ours, continue to increase.'*

They expect there may be an increase in the number and frequency of the desperate and unusual forms of escape that have already begun.

At the same time, even though there is a famine of God's word, more North Koreans are seeing the Bible than at any other time in Korean history!

VOMK said: *'At the request of our North Korean underground Christian partners, VOMK continues to provide Bibles by land, sea, air, radio and internet. We continue to equip North Korean defectors in South Korea with the discipleship strategies and methods entrusted to us by the underground church. Our students reach North Koreans wherever they are found.'*

PRAY

- That the bold and faithful evangelistic spirit of the North Korean underground church would impact Release International's supporters and help them to prepare for underground church
- That Christians in North Korea would remain faithful witnesses



North Korea continued its military parades during the pandemic; Kim Jong Un (pictured above) shared headlines with other authoritarian leaders

CENTRAL ASIA

Persecution of Christians in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Karakalpakstan (an autonomous region within Uzbekistan), Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Buddhist Republic of Kalmykia is expected to remain broadly unchanged although from a human rights point of view there have been improvements in Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan.

MIDDLE EAST



IRAN

'Whilst we give thanks to the Lord that there has not been a wave of persecution against those who have converted (even though some of these can face opposition from family or harassment in their work or studies) there is obviously a campaign to try to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches and those who are involved in evangelism and teaching,' said our partner.

'Persecution is on the increase because the authorities are aware of the growth in the number of converts and house

churches and are determined at all costs to stem this. In fact their overall goal is to exterminate the Persian-speaking church and only allow the Christian minority groups to operate. Longer prison sentences are being given by the courts to some Christian workers. We are thankful that one who was sentenced to ten years has now been released but another has recently started his sentence of ten years.

'There is no doubt that the Government is upset and concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians. They are not willing to accept and acknowledge the rights of those who have converted from a Muslim background.'

Our partner said it was likely that converts and in particular workers and leaders would continue to face increasing pressures in 2024.

'The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in their house group do not know if they are under surveillance or not. These pressures have led to an exodus of some believers/workers from Iran and this is likely to continue in 2024. However, many Iranian refugees who have been living in Turkey for many years are finding it increasingly difficult to be able to remain there and some are facing deportation back to Iran.'

Our partner said that the protests and demonstrations under the banner of "Woman, Life, Freedom" in the past year presented a significant challenge

to the Islamic republic.

'This movement has now been largely suppressed but the ongoing controls, repression and increased surveillance only adds pressure on believers, house churches and any Christian activity.'

At the same time the number of Iranians coming to Christ continued to increase in 2023. There are many economic pressures at the present time but house churches, along with support from Release International, have helped needy believers by providing food and medicines.

'A unique situation exists in Iran in that, even though the Government is firmly opposed to the work of the gospel, many disillusioned Iranians are seeking God. The recent unrest and upheaval inside the country demonstrated the fact that people want justice and freedom. Therefore at a time like this, all means of evangelism, such as the Christian satellite programmes, social media and the ministry of workers on the ground, become so strategic.'

PRAY

- Pray for the protection of house churches. In view of security pressures, groups are meeting in smaller numbers than before. Pray against a spirit of fear, and that they will know the peace and the presence of the Lord
- For the training of new workers which will provide desperately needed human resources on the ground





Women and girls sort through refuse in Cairo. Most of the rubbish collectors are Christians, who live in the poorer parts of the city

Christ's love among the garbage collectors

Project in Cairo helps women stand firm in their Christian faith, writes Jack Norman

In the male-dominated Islamic culture of Egypt the lives of poor Christian women can be extremely vulnerable.

Those in the capital work in the most deprived areas, such as collecting and recycling refuse in the 'Garbage City' of Mokattam, where the stunning cave churches are situated.

However, for more than a decade Release International partners have been serving Christian women in an even poorer rubbish-collection area of Cairo called Ezbet El Nakh.

Known as 'Strength to Stand' the project team documents the living conditions of families there and then comes alongside the women to help them in their daily lives. They suffer because they are Christians, and also because they are women, who are marginalised and often abused.

The project workers assure them that they are not alone and provide practical training in areas such as healthcare and home economics. Central to the project is the place of the Bible and the need for spiritual growth.

As I have visited over the years I am always encouraged by the difference the project is making in the lives of entire families who are reconnecting with, and strengthening, their churches. The priests I have talked to are full of praise for the work, and they are even being put under pressure from the husbands who, having seen the impact on their wives, want to learn the Bible for themselves!

Along with another group funded by one of our associate ministries in Europe, the project team has now visited and documented the

situations in more than 12,000 homes, with many families subsequently receiving help. One of the most satisfying aspects of the work is recognising how many of the current leadership team were actually recipients of assistance in the past.

The name 'Strength to Stand' is key to the aims of the project. I have written previously in *Voice* magazine of how young Christian girls, and even married women, can be enticed to leave their families and marry Muslim men with the promise of a better life. The project helps them to stand firm in their Christian faith, knowing that, whatever they may be promised, it is nothing compared to the treasure they have in Christ.

One of the abiding memories I come away with each time I visit the project is the joy of the leaders.

Covid forced their hand and they rose brilliantly to the challenge

In spite of their circumstances they have great joy in the Lord and feel privileged to serve God in this way.

Another encouragement is how the team responded to the impact of Covid. As with most of the world, the pandemic brought extra pressures but in my visits before the outbreak we had discussed how they could wean themselves off relying on external help for planning and training.

Covid forced their hand and they rose brilliantly to the challenge, creating innovative ways to stay in touch with families and taking full responsibility for planning the project activities, including the Bible teaching plans.

All of this work is thanks to the prayers and help of faithful believers such as Release International supporters in the UK. Thank you and please keep praying for the project teams, which continue to provide poor Christian women in Egypt with the 'Strength to Stand'.



Peter, pictured right, with minister William (centre) and fellow missions team member Eddie of Ellon Baptist Church, which partners in the Building One Body programme

BOB: the (partnership) builder

Connect directly with a Release International project through Building One Body

When you read the New Testament letter of Philippians you cannot help but observe the strength of relationship that exists between the apostle Paul and the church at Philippi. In 1:8 Paul writes, 'God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.' And in 4:1 he describes them as those 'whom I love and long for, my joy and crown'.

Their mutual relationship was centred on a 'partnership in the gospel' (1:5). The Philippians had come to faith in Christ through Paul's work in their region (Acts 16) and since then, through their prayers and financial support, they had invested in his ongoing work in other areas (4:14-16). Paul describes their partnership as 'sharing in his

troubles' (4:14) and something that caused him to 'greatly rejoice' (4:10.)

At Release International we have always invested in developing close relationships with our international ministry partners and through our *Building One Body* church partnership programme we want to offer you the opportunity to participate.

The *Building One Body* programme enables local churches in the UK to develop a deeper relationship with one particular international project – to support and strengthen the body of Christ in a very direct way.

There are a range of projects to choose from and when you join you will receive regular updates from our project partner, an annual project report visit from a Release

International representative, and the opportunity to meet our partner in person or online. In turn we ask you to promote awareness of the project throughout your congregation, commit to praying together regularly for the work, and commit to supporting the project through regular financial giving.

Several churches across the UK have already joined the *Building One Body* programme and have really appreciated developing a deep connection with their chosen project. They know the people they are praying for; they are 'sharing in their troubles' and rejoicing with them, and they are seeing the important difference their support is making.

Ellon Baptist Church in Aberdeenshire is one of those congregations. Peter, a member of the missions team, said: '*Ellon Baptist Church has been privileged to partner with a Building One Body project over the past few years. It has been great for us to have this focus and the regular updates are really helpful in allowing us to pray for specific needs. We recently had a visit from Release International's partners who run the project. This was such a blessing and inspiration for our church. Meeting folks in person makes our links and support much more meaningful and has encouraged more people in our own fellowship to be more committed to this support.*'

Chris Taylor, pastor at Hope Church in Goldthorpe, South Yorkshire, which recently joined the programme, said: '*As a church, we want to have the closest possible relationship with our mission partners. Release International's Building One Body programme is enabling us to begin a direct partnership with those ministering to persecuted Christians in Nigeria. These are people we are hoping to take into our hearts and prayers, not simply through a one-off appeal (valuable though those are), but through regular contact and long-term partnership.*'

Contact James Fraser at jfraser@releaseinternational.org to find out how your church can be part of *Building One Body*.



Holmgate Evangelical Church young people responded to the plight of persecuted Christians

Youngsters take a shot at coffee fundraiser – with amazing results!

Moved by the plight of persecuted Christians – especially those in prison for their faith – the young people's group at Holmgate Evangelical Church in Chesterfield organised a fundraising coffee morning. The result? A fantastic £500 to help persecuted believers!

As well as putting on a marvellous spread of mouthwatering cakes and other edible goodies, the fellowship donated numerous toys, books and games for sale.

A big thank you to everyone at Holmgate, especially the young people who put their concern for the persecuted into practice.

• Our thanks also to supporters Graham and Marina Davis who raised £300 for persecuted Christians by holding not one, not two, but three coffee mornings in their home!

Curtain up on drama's 2024 run

Described in *Premier Christianity* magazine as a 'one-man tour de force' and a 'production bursting with artistic imagination on a level I have rarely experienced before', *If Prison Walls Could Speak* continues to inspire

audiences up and down the UK.

Performances of Artless Theatre Company's moving production, which tells the story of Release International partner Petr Jasek's 2015 imprisonment in Sudan, are being planned for this year. Confirmed early dates are: 'The Few Conference for Evangelists' in Yarnfield on January 23 and Birmingham City Church on January 24.

If your church would like to host a performance of this amazing one-man



INVITE A SPEAKER

Our team of experienced speakers are available to join your church or online meeting to help you support and pray for persecuted Christians. They would love to hear from you!

Ireland:

Stephen on 028 9334 0014 or 07933 313169

London & South:

Jonny on 07861 656269

Midlands & North:

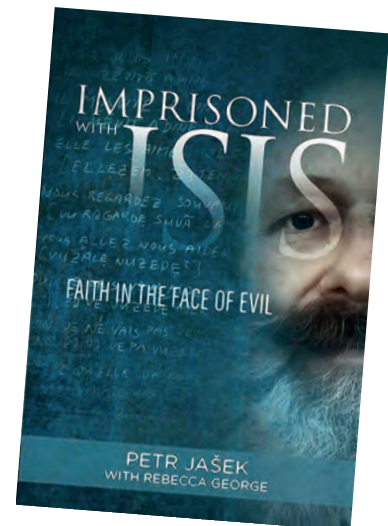
Allister on 07916 396178

Scotland:

James on 07434 894016

Wales & West of England:

Paul on 07861 651139



play, which drew packed audiences at last year's New Wine celebration, more details and a Host Information Pack are available on our website. Churches can also sign up to be a venue at www.artless.org.uk/how-to-book.

Petr's book, *Imprisoned with ISIS*, is available on our website estore.

Fleeing persecution is not surrender or a lack of faith, writes Maciek of our sister ministry, Voice of Persecuted Christians, Poland

When flight is right

In Matthew 10:16-23, Jesus predicted the severe persecution of His disciples. He said they would be 'handed over to the local councils,' 'flogged in the synagogues,' 'brought before governors and kings,' 'arrested,' 'betrayed,' 'hated' and 'put to death.' But then He told them to flee – a surprising command from someone who claimed that He had conquered the world. We may wonder how we could apply that and still be victorious in our faith.

First of all, we need to understand that when, in Acts 1:8, Jesus commanded His disciples to be His witnesses all over the world, He meant just that. They were to be His faithful witnesses who would proclaim His death and resurrection. It was not a call to martyrdom. He wanted them to value their lives as His messengers, use wisdom, and move around in a strategic manner. They should be bold and ready to give everything for the gospel, but at the same time, do their best to stay alive to preach it. Fleeing was an option they should consider, not as a compromise but as a strategic manoeuvre. Experienced generals know that no army can always push forward. At times, you need tactically to retreat in order to regroup. Therefore, fleeing in this context is not a surrender to the enemy or a lack of faith, but wisdom in action.

Our Lord and His apostles also fled to avoid intensifying persecution and even premature death. When Jesus was a baby, the angel told Joseph, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and escape to Egypt' (Matthew 2:13). When Jews 'picked up stones to stone

him,' Jesus 'hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds' (John 8:59).

When the apostle Paul was in Damascus and 'there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him... his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall' (Acts 9:23). When Peter was in prison awaiting execution, an angel of the Lord rescued him, and then Peter 'left for another place' (Acts 12:7-17).

The Bible makes it very clear that all of these flights were crucial to completing the work of salvation and to laying the foundation of the church.

We are not to look for martyrdom; however, we should be ready for it at any moment

In a similar manner, pastor Richard Wurmbbrand, who inspired the founding of Release International, was ransomed from communist Romania

in the 1960s. Afterwards, he started a worldwide ministry to help persecuted Christians. Had he stayed in Romania, he would most probably have been imprisoned again and killed.

We are not to look for martyrdom; however, we should be ready for it at any moment, if our time comes. Jesus did not flee from Gethsemane but handed Himself over to be crucified. Paul and Peter also finished their course as martyrs. Sometimes, as with Paul in the Roman prison, the Holy Spirit may reveal to us that our 'departure is near' (2 Timothy 4:6). At other times, as in the life of Stephen, we may face martyrdom suddenly, without any previous notice (Acts 7). The point is that, regardless of our circumstances, whether in martyrdom, flight, or daily Christian routine, we need to keep in mind that our primary calling is to be faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ.

INSPIRING FAITH



'Not all of us are called to die a martyr's death, but all of us are called to have the same spirit of self-sacrifice and love to the very end as these martyrs had'

Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968 he inspired the founding of Release International, which today continues his ministry to serve persecuted Christians around the world in the name of Jesus.



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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
Voice
of Persecuted Christians



prayershield

January – March 2024



JANUARY 2024

Heavenly Father, as we start this new year, strengthen our resolve to accomplish Your desire that 'requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone.' (1Timothy 2:1)

We particularly pray for those who have fled persecution: Lord, comfort those who mourn loss of home, family and livelihood.

Loving Father, establish them in a new community where they can heal and flourish.

Jesus, bring them to rejoice in knowing You promised that their reward is great in heaven (Matthew 5:10-11)

Amen

IRAQ

MONDAY 1: Pray for Reverend Canon Faez Jirjees of St George's Church in Baghdad. Thank God for his ministry and leadership. Pray for strength, wisdom and peace for him and his family.

TUESDAY 2: Pray for protection for the congregation and wider community of St George's Church, Baghdad. Remember especially the staff at the church and the clinic attached to it as they live and work in what remains a volatile city.

WEDNESDAY 3: Pray for the team of doctors and nurses at St George's Church clinic; for patience, clear-thinking and good teamwork and for effective treatments for their patients.

THURSDAY 4: Remember in prayer those receiving food baskets from Hand of Help in Kurdistan. Many are refugees who have fled conflict in Syria. Pray these gifts will encourage them spiritually as well as nourishing them physically.

FRIDAY 5: Pray for those attending Bible study courses run by Hand of Help in Kurdistan, many of whom have never encountered the scriptures before. Pray that what they discover in the Bible will transform their lives.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
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SATURDAY 6: Pray for those receiving help with housing, bedding and other essentials from Hand of Help in Kurdistan this winter. Many are refugees who arrived in Erbil with nothing.

SUNDAY 7: Pray for Christians in Iraq who face regular discrimination because of their faith: in education, employment, housing, custody of children and other aspects of life. Pray for the efforts of our partners who are raising these challenges with their governments.

AFGHANISTAN

MONDAY 8: Thank God for Pastor Maia and his team in Brazil who have welcomed more than 100 refugees who have been forced to flee Afghanistan because of their faith in Jesus.

TUESDAY 9: Thank God that the Afghan refugees now living in Brazil have been a tremendous encouragement to the church there.

WEDNESDAY 10: Pray that Afghan Christians still arriving in Brazil as refugees would integrate well and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

THURSDAY 11: Pray for 26 Afghans who are part of regular telephone classes in which they learn more about the Christian faith. Several are isolated and unable to have fellowship with others.

FRIDAY 12: Pray for 'Nasir' and 'Tasneem' who work for a Release International partner, overseeing a radio ministry that broadcasts hundreds of gospel-centred programmes into Afghanistan.

SATURDAY 13: Pray for 'Jamal' and 'Rasa' who work with Afghans, following up inquiries to radio programmes as well as carrying out ongoing discipleship training over the telephone.

SUNDAY 14: Give thanks for Release International partners involved in the recent completion of the revised Dari New Testament alongside the Afghan Pashto New Testament and the Hazaragi New Testament.

UKRAINE

MONDAY 15: Despite the devastation and dangerous conditions, our partners are still active in ministry throughout Ukraine. Pray for their continued faithfulness despite the persecution and danger.

TUESDAY 16: 'Anton' is a pastor in the Kharkiv region. His family lives in Poland, but he stayed in Ukraine to care for his congregation and many internally displaced people. Pray for Anton and pastors like him as they faithfully preach the word of God and care for others, despite being close to the frontline.

WEDNESDAY 17: Pray that 'Ilya', a deacon who remained in Mariupol to look after the remnant of his church, will be able to comfort those who are left and for boldness as he continues to evangelise his neighbours.

THURSDAY 18: Pastor 'Bogdan' is a team member of one of our frontline partners and is active on the Ukrainian-Russian

border. His home was recently destroyed by a Russian rocket. He is well known for his ministry and our partners suspect that his house was deliberately targeted.

FRIDAY 19: Many evangelical Christians remain in Poland. Thank God for the Polish churches that still help many Ukrainian refugees, including Nina, a widow, and her two young sons. Nina's husband was killed in 2022 as he helped in the evacuation of women and children from the war zone.

SATURDAY 20: Pray for safety for our partners as they distribute winter supplies to fellowships near the front line. Pray also for these fellowships as they share their goods and the gospel with their neighbours.

SUNDAY 21: Our partners report that as they have travelled around Ukraine they have witnessed a great openness for the gospel and the light of Christ shining from the churches. Pray especially for believers in the occupied areas; that they know God's presence as they live for Christ in a hostile environment.

SYRIA

MONDAY 22: Pray for those still caught up in the long-running conflict in Syria and for God's protection upon them, especially those who take great risks to continue Christian ministry within the country.

TUESDAY 23: Pray for our partners who minister to Syrian refugees in several neighbouring countries, including Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey, many of whom face tough situations in



Vital food packages for Christians in South Sudan provided by Release International partners

their own countries as well as the needs of so many displaced people.

WEDNESDAY 24: Pray for all those who have been forced to flee Syria, often with only the clothes on their backs. Pray that they find a warm welcome from Christians and churches wherever they find themselves.

THURSDAY 25: Thank God for the many Syrian refugees who are finding Christ as they are cared for by believers in the refugee camps.

FRIDAY 26: Pray for protection over refugees who are coming to Christ in the camps. For many their families will try to kill them because of the perceived shame they have brought on them.

SATURDAY 27: Some 80 per cent of Syrian refugees lack any legal status – and most live in extreme poverty. Pray that God will continue to provide for their needs through Christians who will also point them to the Saviour.

SUNDAY 28: Pray for those in Syria who choose to leave Islam. In extreme cases the response to this is violent. Those considered apostates can face sanctions in the Sharia (Islamic law) personal status courts such as forcible divorce and removal of child custody.

SOUTH SUDAN

MONDAY 29: Many Christians in South Sudan have no source of income and no way of attaining food. Thank God that with the help of local churches our partners are able to step in and help to meet their needs.

TUESDAY 30: Pray for safety for Release International partners as they deliver vital aid to Christians who are suffering extreme poverty in South Sudan.

WEDNESDAY 31: Thank God for the testimonies of people such as Philip who is blind and lives with his grandmother and brother. He told our partners: 'God bless you all for caring for people like us.'

FEBRUARY 2024 NIGERIA

THURSDAY 1: Thank God for the improvement in the Nigerian security situation. Some had anticipated an increase in violence after the presidential elections last February but incidences of violence and kidnapping were declining towards the end of 2023 compared with the first and second quarters, our partner reported.

FRIDAY 2: Despite the efforts of the current Government, there are still pockets of violence. Recently, students at a university in Zamfara state were kidnaped by bandits. Please pray for their wellbeing and release.

SATURDAY 3: Pray that the new government leadership of Nigeria from the President and his cabinet, ministers and governors to local government chairmen and traditional rulers will rule with honesty and justice. There is so much injustice and oppression, which affects many poor Christians.

SUNDAY 4: Pray for Christians who have been displaced from their homes by the violence of Islamist militants. The conditions in the camps where they now live have been described as dire. Pray that those who have lost hope of returning to their homes will find comfort and strength in Jesus.

MONDAY 5: Recently armed gunmen believed to be Fulani herdsman killed eight

villagers and wounded five others in an attack in Bassa, Plateau state. Our partner attended the burials to support the grieving families and church. Please pray for all those affected by this attack and for a complete end to the violence in Plateau and across northern Nigeria.

TUESDAY 6: Thank God that our partners were able to travel to the town of Zuru in Kebbi State, northwest Nigeria, to administer trauma healing to Christians affected by attacks in the region. Pray that their work will bring much comfort to the traumatised and bereaved and that the evils perpetrated by Boko Haram terrorists, Fulani militants and other armed groups and kidnappers would end.

WEDNESDAY 7: Please pray for the work of all our partners in Nigeria: for the Stefanos Foundation, for Archbishop

Ben Kwashi and Archdeacon Mark Mukan. Please pray for their safety as they travel to carry out their vital work which Release International helps to fund.

NORTH KOREA

THURSDAY 8: Pray for the discipleship programmes in various places throughout South Korea, which seeks to train and equip North Korean defectors to be ministers of the gospel.

FRIDAY 9: Pray for North Korean defectors who are translating God's word as part of their discipleship programme. Pray that the word of Christ would dwell in them richly.

SATURDAY 10: Pray that the Lord would strengthen North Korean believer Mrs J in the midst of opposition from her son. He has been sending her anti-Christian messages,

which has brought huge discouragement.

SUNDAY 11: Give thanks for the Bible dance therapy helping North Koreans, including Mrs J, to overcome trauma. Defectors also learn how the Bible came to Korea and are enabled to grow as disciples.

MONDAY 12: Pray for the security of North Korean believers, whose lives are constantly at risk as they engage in discreet discipleship and evangelism activities. Please pray for their protection in the midst of their faithfulness.

TUESDAY 13: Pray for those living in North Korea who listen to gospel radio broadcasts produced by Release International partners. Pray that many would respond in faith.

WEDNESDAY 14: Thank God for new connections with underground Christians in North Korea and the opportunity to distribute Bibles through various means. Please pray for the underground Christians who receive these Bibles.

BURKINA FASO

THURSDAY 15: Pray for the political and security situation in Burkina Faso where successive recent coups and attempted coups have weakened the country and left its people without a democratic voice.

FRIDAY 16: Pray for the hundreds of thousands of people in Burkina Faso who have fled from attacks by



Pray for safety for Archbishop Ben Kwashi as well as all other Release International partners who help persecuted Christians in dangerous areas

jihadist groups. Pray God's protection over them and His blessing on those who are helping them.

SATURDAY 17: Pray for those displaced Christians receiving food parcels, help with school fees and medical assistance through our partners in several towns and cities. May they be encouraged as well as sustained by these acts of Christian solidarity.

SUNDAY 18: Pray for the wider Sahel region. The troubles in Burkina Faso and neighbouring Mali and Niger overlap and are similar to those faced in Nigeria and Sudan. Pray for God's hand upon this whole region and for His wisdom and strength for His people wherever they are persecuted.

MONDAY 19: Pray for Pastor John, who fled his home and church after jihadists threatened to kill him. Pray for protection for his family as they immediately started to serve the Lord in the place of their refuge.

TUESDAY 20: Pray for Anna, a widow who grieves the loss of her husband, a pastor, killed by jihadists. May the Lord give her the ability to forgive and may she be encouraged by the practical help of Christians.

WEDNESDAY 21: Ask for God's blessing on Salamata, a widow who was injured during an attack in which her husband was killed. Pray for her healing and for the opportunity for her and her family to start a new, stable life.

INDONESIA

THURSDAY 22: Pray for wisdom and guidance for the Indonesia Bethel Church (Gereja Bethel Indonesia) outside Jakarta, which was forced to move its services online temporarily after a mob protested outside its doors.

FRIDAY 23: Bowing to pressure from Islamic protesters, local officials in South Sulawesi Province recently vowed to withdraw permission that had been granted to build a Christian school. Pray that permission will not be revoked.

SATURDAY 24: Ask God to grant courage and wisdom to church leaders as they negotiate ways for their congregations to worship sometimes under acute pressure from hardliners opposed to the gospel.

SUNDAY 25: Pray that the authorities will act quickly to stop militants disrupting church services. Some congregations have recently been forced to stop services.

MONDAY 26: Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, totalling 220 million, but the highlands of Central Sulawesi are home to many Christians. Pray that followers of Christ in this area will continue to be able to practise their faith freely.

TUESDAY 27: Pray for the continued restoration of the three churches targeted by Islamic State suicide bombers in 2018. A total of



Fenny Suryawati inspires many with her testimony of forgiveness towards the terrorists who caused her injuries

15 people were killed in the explosions including 10 from Surabaya Central Pentecostal Church. Several more were injured.

WEDNESDAY 28: Pray that God would convict those responsible for the terrorist attacks on Christians in 2018 and bring them to repentance and faith.

THURSDAY 29: Thank God for the testimony of Fenny Suryawati, who suffered horrendous injuries in the May 2018 terrorist bomb attack on her church yet inspires many with her story of recovery and forgiveness.

'I AM SO HAPPY I CAN DO PRACTICAL DAY-TO-DAY TASKS AGAIN – IT'S A MIRACLE!'

Fenny Suryawati, who suffered horrendous injuries, Indonesia

MARCH 2024

ERITREA

FRIDAY 1: Praise God for Aster's release from prison and pray for her as she rebuilds her life. Pray especially for healing, peace and comfort in light of the many traumas she suffered whilst imprisoned.

SATURDAY 2: Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, pictured, will have spent 20 years in prison this May. Dr Kiflu has never been charged with a crime or been tried in a court of law. Please pray



for him and his family: wife Elsa, sons Yosias, Daniel and Senai, and daughter Hermala.

SUNDAY 3: Pray for Jospheh, who has been imprisoned several times for his faith in Christ. Give thanks for his unwavering faithfulness in spite of the fierce persecution he faces.

MONDAY 4: Pray for Milion Gebreselassie, a nurse and anaesthetist, who has been imprisoned for his faith in Jesus for more than nine years.

TUESDAY 5: Pray that God would comfort the family and friends of Pastor Tesfay Seyoum as the first anniversary of his death approaches. Tesfay died in prison, having spent ten years behind bars. His family could not bury him in his hometown because of his faith in Christ.



Prayerfully remember Aster whose twin sister was beaten to death in an Eritrean prison

WEDNESDAY 6: Pray for Rev Haile Naizgi, who is from the same church as Dr Kiflu and has also been imprisoned since 2004.

THURSDAY 7: Pray for Mussie Ezaz (pictured with his family) who has been imprisoned without charge or trial since 2007. Like many Christians imprisoned in



Eritrea, there is no indication when or if he will ever be released. Pray also for his wife and three children.

SUDAN

FRIDAY 8: Pray that God will build His church in Sudan, where there are estimated to be around two million believers, and that Christians will be a strong witness to God's love amid the current power struggles.

SATURDAY 9: Sudanese Christians can attend church services openly, but activities

that threaten Islam's dominance can still lead to believers (especially church leaders) being detained and imprisoned. Pray they would be wise especially in how they share the gospel.

SUNDAY 10: Continue to pray for Christians in the contested Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile and Darfur regions on the border with South Sudan, where persecution has persisted for many years.

MONDAY 11: Release International supports the work of an associate ministry that provides essential medicines, family medical packs and other resources to Christian families in the Nuba mountains. Pray for God's protection and blessing on this work and safety for our associate's frontline workers.

TUESDAY 12: Ask God to protect converts from Islam who often face hostility from their families and communities.

WEDNESDAY 13: Use Psalm 133 to pray for unity and harmony among Sudanese churches and their leaders.

THURSDAY 14: Please pray for Release International partners who are ministering in neighbouring countries and are seeing a significant harvest among Sudanese refugees. We are hearing reports of whole families as well as individuals coming to Christ.

SOMALIA

FRIDAY 15: Praise God for the increasing numbers of Somalis who are hearing the gospel (through various means) and are choosing to follow Jesus. Pray for them to stand firm in their faith and to rely on the leading of the Holy Spirit.

SATURDAY 16: Pray for Somali believers who have been forced to leave their homes and are now residing in neighbouring countries. Many of them struggle to get the right documents to allow them fully to integrate and are forced into low-paid jobs even if they are highly skilled.

SUNDAY 17: Pray for Somali believers who find themselves isolated from their families due to following Christ but are not able to join a church in their new homeland because of fear and suspicion from local Christians. This double rejection is causing a high depression rate among Somali believers.

MONDAY 18: There are no church buildings in Somalia, it is strictly illegal to convert or to evangelise and Christians must exercise extreme care when meeting in groups. Pray for God's protection on them and that their gatherings will go unnoticed.

TUESDAY 19: Christians are more likely to be killed by al-Shabaab, the terrorist group, or family members than to be imprisoned by the Government. They are actively pursued and when discovered face death. Pray for courage to continue as believers under such extreme oppression.

WEDNESDAY 20: Bibles are illegal and extremely dangerous to own in Somalia. Most believers access digital versions on their phones or other devices. Pray that these items would remain secure.

THURSDAY 21: The autonomous region of Somaliland has seen a recent

increase in the number of underground Christians being arrested. Pray for their safety and release from detention.

ALGERIA

FRIDAY 22: Pray for the 42 (out of 45) Protestant churches that have been closed by the Government and are waiting permission to re-open. Give thanks for the online tools which enable them to continue some level of ministry and fellowship while the buildings remain shut.

SATURDAY 23: Pray for the Algerian pastors who have been arrested, tried and in some cases jailed for holding 'unauthorised worship' activity. Pray for courage for them, skill for their lawyers and comfort for their families during these trials.

SUNDAY 24: Ask for God's protection on the Protestant churches that remain open, and that God will continue to bless their ministries.



Al-Shabaab terrorists target Christians in Somalia

MONDAY 25: Pray for the women's ministry of the Algerian Protestant churches, especially in places where the pastors have been prevented from ministering by the State. As a result, their wives effectively carry the churches through these challenging times.

TUESDAY 26: Pray for Muslim-background believers who have encountered the gospel for the first time in Algeria, sometimes online or even through dreams and visions. May God guide and bless them in their next steps of faith.

WEDNESDAY 27: There is strong family and societal pressure against those who choose to leave Islam in Algeria. Pray for their protection and that they will remain strong and withstand the demands to return to their former religion.

THURSDAY 28: Although the law allows requests for the building of facilities for 'non-Muslim' worship in Algeria, in practice no response has ever been made to an application. Pray for this to change.

ETHIOPIA

PRAYERS FOR EASTER

GOOD FRIDAY: As we remember our Lord's sacrifice on the cross, let's pray for His body, the church worldwide, which continues to suffer for His name. In particular lift up to God Isayas and his church in Ethiopia as they share the gospel with their neighbours amidst the risk of violent opposition. Thank God for their faithfulness; their church and homes were destroyed in an arson attack by Islamist extremists three years ago.

MARCH 30: Pray for 'Gudina', a leader in a Protestant church in western Ethiopia that was attacked by Ethiopian Orthodox militants three years ago. Praise God that the church building has been rebuilt and the congregation continues to be salt and light in the community.

EASTER SUNDAY: As we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus

Christ, let's give thanks and praise for those who have chosen to follow Him despite the consequences; believers such as Abdu and his wife. Abdu, who had been a teacher of Islam, lost both his house and income as a result of his new faith. He now sells fruit and tells his customers that 'Jesus is as sweet as a pineapple'. Pray that his ministry would bring many people to Christ.

*Gracious Lord,
Thank You for giving me new
life through Your death and
resurrection.*

*May Your church worldwide
know that same resurrection
power in the days ahead. Grant
Your people wisdom in how to
express worship and share the
gospel.*

*Many of our persecuted church
family fear attack. Give them
confidence that 'no weapon
forged against [them] will
prosper' (Isaiah 54:17).*

*Bring good from every wicked
plan of the enemy.*

*Thank You for the example
You showed us in loving
Your enemies, desiring their
salvation too.*

*May Your Kingdom come, and
Your will be done.*

Amen

Sources: International Christian Concern; Morning Star News; Release International partners and contacts; VOM Canada; VOM Korea; VOM USA.

Some names have been changed to protect identities.

While we do not provide financial support to every Christian mentioned in *Prayer Shield*, we believe in the power of prayer to change lives.

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