

voice

of Persecuted Christians

HELPING OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

End of religious
tolerance?

*Pressure grows on
India's Christians*

Persecuted in
a 'Christian'
country

*Converts in Ethiopia
pay a high price*

Strength to
Stand in Pakistan

*How your support
helps the poorest
believers*

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



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

Help for those
facing the
world's hatred

At this time of year, in our celebration of Easter, we are reminded of the immense cost of salvation – and also of the hatred the world has for Christ and His church. If you don't believe the latter, a quick read through the pages of this magazine should convince you.

Oppression against Christians in India is on the rise like never before (see pages 6-11) as militants promote a strong Hindu nationalist agenda. Yet there is much to be inspired by: pastors will not be cowed even by physical intimidation or actual violence against them or the very real prospect of imprisonment simply for sharing the gospel – something that would have been unthinkable in India not so long ago.

In Pakistan, converts are paying a high price for embracing Christ – yet are undeterred. They, like the early disciples, have encountered the risen Saviour and are passionate about sharing that truth with others, no matter what the cost. You can read their inspiring stories on pages 12 and 13.

At the same time in Pakistan communities are being helped by Release International-supported Strength to Stand groups which have been empowering poor Christian women for many years now (see pages 14 and 15). As well as providing them with finance to start micro businesses they provide fellowship and prayerful support, so vital to those who may be living in repressive environments. In fact so successful have the groups been that there are

now more than 350 in Pakistan, a number of which are for impoverished Christian men.

Thanks again to your support, our partners in Ethiopia are able to hold workshops to help believers to tackle trauma and find new skills that will enable them to earn a living (see pages 16-19). Some have fled the oppressive Eritrean regime while others have been persecuted in Ethiopia itself.

WHAT KIND OF LEGACY WILL YOU LEAVE?

Projects such as the Strength to Stand groups in Pakistan and the workshops in Ethiopia have only been possible because of your generous support, sometimes over many years. We are so grateful to you for that dedication and commitment.

Included with this magazine is a leaflet about legacies. Please do prayerfully consider how God may be prompting you to continue to support our ministry by leaving a gift to Release International in your will. We are so grateful to those people, often long-term supporters, who have left a bequest as their final action to help God's suffering people and to raise their voice.

FABULOUS FUNDRAISERS

Your commitment to helping our persecuted sisters and brothers never ceases to inspire me. On page 21 we report on some of the latest fundraising initiatives – from singing to sponsored swimming. Thank you to all those who contributed. I'm sure your actions will encourage many more of us to get involved in the coming days!

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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

voice

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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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FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR



Faith under fire

Algerian protestant churches targeted

A total of 42 out of the Evangelical Protestant Association's 45 churches in Algeria have been closed since 2017 and more than 50 of its pastors and leaders prosecuted by the state since November 2021. Some ministers have already been sent to prison while others are awaiting the appeal of their sentences.

The closed churches have had wax seals placed upon the doors and the homes of Christians have been raided and searched for Bibles or other Christian literature. This has caused many Christians to flee the country, or to stop meeting together.

The overwhelming majority of Christians in Algeria are recent converts, brought to faith in rapidly growing churches whose success in spreading the gospel came to be seen as a threat by the state and the Islamic establishment.

Continuing active church ministry in this context is very difficult and can be stressful for those involved, and their families, who are under surveillance from the state.

Release International is supporting our Christian brothers and sisters in Algeria during these difficult times and would ask all of our supporters to pray for them.

Fears over Belarus's new religion law

Christians in Belarus have expressed concern about Belarus's repressive new religion law – now signed by President Aleksandr Lukashenko and which comes into force in July.

The legislation continues to require all religious communities to gain state registration before they are allowed to exist and continues to ban the activity of unregistered religious organisations. All registered religious communities are required to seek re-registration between July 5 this year and next.

Leonid Mikhovich, the head of the Baptist Union, welcomed several changes in the final version compared with the earlier draft, including the removal of a requirement for religious organisations to report to local executive committees on their religious education of children. However, he expressed concern that no possibility exists for small religious communities without 20 adult founders. He also expressed concern about the extensive information founders need to provide to the authorities.

'We look at the new law with caution,' a Protestant pastor who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 while the new law was in preparation. *'It promises nothing good, but it depends on how formally it will be applied as the wording in some parts is obscure.'* The pastor noted the *'endlessly expanding'* list of reasons the state could use to liquidate religious communities. *'If desired, they may be applied to any religious organisation.'* (Source: Forum 18)



President Lukashenko signed the law that will restrict religious communities

Bailed Iranian brothers request prayer

Friends and family of Iranian Alireza and Amir Nourmohammadi are grateful that they were released conditionally following their arrest in December, but request prayer as they face prosecution for their Christian activities.

The brothers were arrested, along with Milad Goodarzi, another convert, by intelligence agents last December. Milad was released after questioning, but Alireza and Amir remained detained for more than four weeks.

The brothers were released in January after submitting bail of 300 million tomans (about £2,300) each. They face charges of engaging in *'deviant educational or propaganda activities contrary to the holy Islamic law by making false claims in religious fields.'*

(Source: Middle East Concern)

Mauritania releases 'baptism video' Christians

Officials in Mauritania have released all Christians arrested after a video of a baptism ceremony in November prompted Muslims to call for their punishment, Christian leaders in the region said.

The Christians do not appear to have been charged with any crime.

'They have been asked to go home and believe what they want, but in private and discreetly,' a Christian leader in the region told Christian Daily International. *'It seems that our brothers have more to fear from the Islamists than from their government. Thank God for this happy ending.'*

At least 15 and possibly as many as 18 Christians were arrested along with their families but were later released. There is no law against evangelism in the northwest African country, though officials ban any public expression of faith except Islam.

(Sources: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News; Voice of the Martyrs podcast)

Listen to our latest podcasts



SUPPORTING THE SUFFERING IN ERITREA Our latest *Voice* podcast is a conversation with our partner Dr Berhane Asmelash, who runs Release Eritrea. He speaks about the background to persecution in that country and how his ministry has been supporting those who are persecuted. He also talks about his forthcoming autobiography, which Release International will be publishing later this year.

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2024 Persecution has always been one of the ways the powers of darkness seek to stop the spread of the gospel. That's why it's important that we pray. But to pray with understanding we need to know who to pray for and what to pray for. We need to be informed. In this edition of Release International's *Voice* podcast we hear from Tom Hardie. Tom edits our quarterly *Voice* magazine and recently compiled our annual Persecution Trends report, which is available on our website: releaseinternational.org

HOPE AND HELP WHEN HEARTS ARE OVERWHELMED India is the world's largest democracy. A country whose constitution grants its citizens the freedom not only to profess and practise, but even to propagate, religion. And yet it is a country where the persecution of Christians continues. In this edition of the *Voice* podcast we hear about recent violent attacks on Christian communities, particularly in the northeast of India.

UKRAINE: ENDURING FOR CHRIST AND THE GOSPEL The second part of our conversation with Maciek, from our sister ministry in Poland, about the situation for evangelical Christians in Ukraine. Listen in to hear about the work that is being done there – and also of the growing zeal among Christians in Ukraine to share the gospel.

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Release



Mayflower Church student Beth is pictured recently celebrating starting school in the US with her parents. Beth, who began her first college classes recently in pursuit of becoming a nurse, is part of the so-called Mayflower Church, which was forced to flee China and found refuge in the US. As the church's own school in China was banned and deemed illegal by communist party officials, neither Beth nor any other Mayflower student would have been able to go to college or pursue any form of education in China. (Source: ChinaAid)

Life sentence for 'blasphemy accused' Christian



Fanson Shahid has been sentenced to life in prison

A judge sentenced a Christian to life in prison under Pakistan's blasphemy laws for a social media message that relatives say was posted using a phone stolen from him, sources said.

Fanson Shahid, aged 56, had been beaten in his home in Lahore when arrested in March 2022 and tortured into confessing after he was accused of posting a derogatory remark about Islam's prophet Mohammed in a comment on a post that another Christian had shared, his wife, Safia Shahid, said.

The phone on which the Facebook comment was made had been stolen from him in 2019, she said.

Justice Zafar Yab Chadhar of the Additional Sessions Court Gujranwala District, Punjab Province, handed down the sentence in January.


'We were praying for Shahid's acquittal because he's innocent, but the verdict has shattered our hopes for justice,' his sister, Sonia Shahid, told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News.

Investigators found Fanson's Facebook account was logged on in the new phone they recovered in 2022 and presented that as evidence that he had made the comment. His wife, Safia Shahid, said at that time, *'We believe that the lost phone was misused by someone to post the blasphemous comment, because my husband did not use a passcode for its security, and his Facebook account was also logged in.'*

Fanson Shahid was convicted under Section 295-C of Pakistan's blasphemy statutes, which calls for a mandatory death sentence, but Chadhar cited as a *'mitigating circumstance'* that the comment was posted *'only once'*.

Sonia Shahid said the verdict shocked the family, members of the Full Gospel Assemblies church. Fanson has two children, and his family has been forced to relocate from their house due to fears for their security.

Prominent Christian lawyer Lazar Allah Rakha said the verdict showed the court had disregarded the defence's arguments without giving a reason for doing so. *'Moreover, there are glaring contradictions in the statements of the prosecution witnesses which discredit the entire prosecution evidence,'* Rakha told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News. (Source: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News)



Is this the end of religious tolerance in India?

Church pastors are paying a high price for sharing the gospel as the persecution of Christians spreads across the subcontinent, writes Release International's John Lawson

For Christians in the UK travelling to and from church on a Sunday morning may be fraught – getting a young family ready in time for a service has always had its challenges – but we rarely if ever encounter hostility on our journey.

Pastor 'Rajendra'* wasn't expecting trouble either, as he walked home from leading a service at his small church in a rural village in Rajasthan,

but suddenly he found himself surrounded by a gang of eight men attacking him with swords, axes and metal rods. They beat him severely and left him for dead, lying bleeding in the road, not far from his house. Rajendra was saved by someone who found him and took him to hospital, where he required treatment for 40 days.

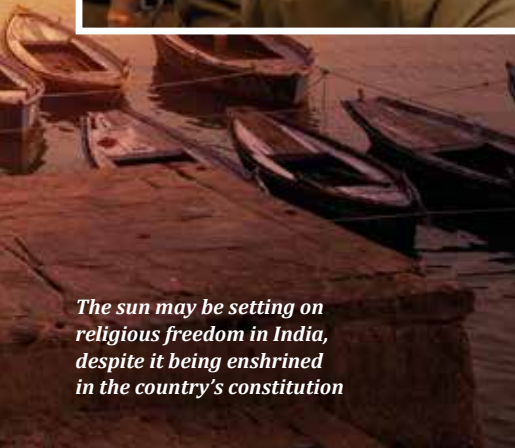
The gang who attacked him were not robbers but Hindu fanatics

who wanted to drive him, his small church and all traces of Christianity out of their village. Thanks to Release International's partner in India, Rajendra received extensive physiotherapy after his hospital treatment and a motorbike to aid his mobility, especially to and from the hilly surrounding villages.

That attack was eight years ago, but he suffers pain in his legs even now. He's also still ministering in the same village, and sometimes he sees some of the men who attacked him (Rajendra forgave them and so the police case against them was dropped). He says they leave him alone now but he prays that one day they will come to faith and



Members of the militant RSS organisation have opposed Christian activity



The sun may be setting on religious freedom in India, despite it being enshrined in the country's constitution

understand the forgiving love of Christ.

This case is not isolated. On our recent visit to India we met several pastors who have been physically attacked, or arrested, or both; simply for worshipping God, whether in homes, in small churches or on the street. The motivation is always the same and is one that is growing ever stronger in India: the concept of Hindutva which essentially means that to be Hindu is to be Indian and to be Indian is to be Hindu – and therefore those Indians who follow other religions are increasingly treated as second-class citizens. Particular hatred is directed at those who attempt to share their non-Hindu

faith with others, namely Muslims and Christians; they have recently been branded as ‘threats to the state’ by prominent Hindu leaders.

HOTBED OF HINDUTVA

Of course, India is a vast country, and there are many and significant differences between its northern and southern states and the people who live in them. While the hotbed of *Hindutva* has always been the ‘cow-belt’ northern and central states, its reach is now extending into every corner of the country. Another pastor we spoke to, ‘Joshua’*, is from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, and he was badly beaten by a Hindu mob while handing out Bibles to people on the street, requiring hospital treatment for five days, (also paid for by our partner in country). He still has pain in his ears and leg today. The police released his attackers without further charge after only five days.

Like Rajendra, Joshua still sees his attackers as he ministers in the same community. He smiles at them, but they don’t respond. In his community the issue of caste also remains a real

challenge. Hindus fear Christianity because it disrupts the caste system which keeps the elite at the top and the masses at the bottom. When people learn about Jesus’s love for everyone and that they are all made equally in the image of God, they start breaking free from this mentality. However, Joshua told us it still presents challenges for house-church fellowships when new believers gather in the homes of people who were from different castes to them. Ideally, he would like a separate church building, completely neutral of any caste association, in which to gather his believers together as equals, but this is becoming much harder in a place where the state increasingly colludes with Hindu mobs who will not accept new churches in their communities.

Pastor ‘Manraj’*, who comes from northwest India, knows this only too well. He recently started constructing a church building for his growing congregation and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), a militant Hindu organisation, mobilised a mob

Continued overleaf..



Kuki tribe members protest against the killings in Manipur

to obstruct it and threaten them. Thankfully, in his case a prominent local Sikh politician stepped in and ensured the building could continue. However, the case of this benevolent politician is an exception in a country where many state governments (India is federal and each of its 28 states can pass their own laws) are passing 'anti-conversion laws' which put ever-tighter restrictions on Christian activity, contravening the constitution of India which guarantees religious freedom for all Indians. Twelve states have passed anti-conversion laws with ambiguous wording about 'inducements' which are easily manipulated to provoke arrest even for praying for a neighbour in their house or offering someone a Bible. This prohibition on conversion applies only to those wishing to become Christians or Muslims. Becoming a Hindu, in contrast, is not seen as conversion, but as a 'home-coming' for which inducements and

benefits are not only permitted but often encouraged and funded by the state. Furthermore, in practice these laws do not apply only to 'new converts' but to anyone following minority faiths in those states. Even the traditional Anglican Church of North India has recently had its organisational status revoked by the Government, severely restricting its capacity to receive external funds. World Vision, the humanitarian aid organisation, has been similarly affected.

'Each day in the prison was like a month. It was like hell'

Pastors who continue to minister within these states now face real risks of arrest and imprisonment as well as attacks and intimidation. Pastor 'Mohan*', for example, is from Uttar Pradesh (UP), which is India's most populous state and its most fervently

Hindu nationalist one. He has been repeatedly harassed by local media and questioned by the police about his ministry, including under arrest; but without sufficient evidence to press any charges he was released.

Mohan explained that a mob, who were unhappy that a family whose daughter experienced a miraculous healing after Christian prayer had stopped coming to the temple and making regular offerings, complained so much about his release that he was arrested again and imprisoned on false charges. Mohan told us that 'each day in the prison was like a month. It was like hell'. Another prisoner beat him and he got a skin infection from a dirty prison blanket. Thankfully his brother was able to engage a lawyer who got him released after a month, but his case is ongoing, requiring him to attend court each month. Our partner in India provides legal assistance to many pastors in

similar situations all over the country, but UP is the worst affected with over 130 church leaders currently in prison, many in pre-trial custody having been refused bail.

ETHNIC VIOLENCE

Such is the collusion now between the mob, hell-bent on preserving Hinduism at all costs, and the powers of the state that attacks on Christians happen brazenly and with impunity. This is nowhere more evident than in the far north-eastern state of Manipur which was riven by ethnic violence last May. The situation in Manipur is complex and the conflict between the Meitei and Kuki peoples is multi-dimensional; based upon ethnicity, politics, access to valuable protected land (legally determined by 'Scheduled Tribe Status', protests against the changing of which initiated the current troubles) and religion: the Kuki are almost 100 per cent Christian, whereas the Meitei are predominantly Hindu (and the neighbouring Nagas have their own traditional religious practices closely related to Hinduism). However, the testimony we heard firsthand, from both Meitei and Kuki Christians, is that the mass violence against Kukis, which has forced more than 60,000 of them to flee while state police and national security forces stood by without intervening, would never have been permitted to last so long if the Kukis were not Christian. Videos of people defiling and burning hundreds of Kuki Christian churches, with their faces uncovered, whilst armed with automatic weapons – despite a significant military presence in the area – are circulating freely on the internet, suggesting a spirit of total impunity and no fear of prosecution.

'Even if I die, I will not stop serving the Lord'

Furthermore, the similar desecration and destruction of over 250 Meitei Christian churches, also by Meitei mobs, and again, without interruption by the authorities, suggests that, whatever the complex ethnic and political origins of the Meitei-Kuki dispute, it has become in effect a

pogrom against Christians, conducted by Meitei Hindu mobs but with at least tacit support from the authorities.

Amid such accounts of pure hatred against Christians and wanton destruction of their lives and property it would be easy to be discouraged, especially as they portray an image of India which has changed so much in the past two decades, and is moving in the opposite direction to the inclusive vision of Gandhi and its other founding fathers.

However, there is much to be inspired by. 'Motilal'* is another pastor who was brutally attacked, along with his wife, in their home in Rajasthan, and has also been arrested and fined by the police. Yet, he said, *'Even if I die, I will not stop serving the Lord and doing the ministry he has given me in this village.'*

PRAY FOR INDIA

- **Pray for pastors currently in prison, or facing legal cases as a result of their Christian ministry, and for our partner giving them legal advice and support**
- **Pray for healing for those who have been physically injured or still suffer trauma as a result of being attacked**
- **Pray for churches that are growing fast and yet lack a safe place to meet**
- **Pray for wisdom and protection for those faith leaders who face difficult decisions when working under such pressure**
- **Pray that India's Supreme Court will uphold its constitution and strike down anti-conversion laws**
- **Pray for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Manipur, a safe return for all those who have been displaced and provision of safe places of worship for both Kuki and Meitei Christians**
- **Pray for India's national elections in April-May 2024, for a peaceful voting process, a fair count and the election of honest leaders who will govern for the good of all Indians whatever their faith**

For all these pastors, it takes great faith to step out of their house each day, not knowing where or when the next threat or attack will come from, and knowing that the police are now as likely to add to their troubles as they are to protect them. Yet, they do it anyway, continuing to love and serve God by loving and serving their neighbours, and in doing so they are reaping much fruit. Amid these accounts of hardship we also heard testimonies of people turning away from drunkenness, despair and domestic violence to follow Jesus; of poor children being educated and getting good jobs, of girls and women escaping temple prostitution, and of the sick getting healthcare, or even miraculous healing. Our partners in India are following the example of Jesus's holistic ministry on earth and thousands of people are responding to this love as they always have done, wherever and whenever the gospel is presented in matching word and deed by people who live it out, consistently, selflessly and even to the point of ultimate sacrifice. As the leader of our partner organisation said: *'The India we knew is gone, but the church will grow and survive if we Christians continue to live out our faith.'*

*Names changed to protect identities.



HOW RELEASE INTERNATIONAL HELPS IN INDIA

- **Provides legal assistance to church leaders who have been accused and arrested**
- **Provides support for medical care and assistance for the injured including long-term rehabilitation**
- **Supplies Bibles**
- **Emergency relief such as for those displaced by violence**



BJP workers and supporters wave their party's Lotus print flags during a roadshow by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Uttar Pradesh

Fears for constitution as country goes to the polls

India and its Christian population are in particular need of your prayers as the country heads for national elections in the coming weeks.

The Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, has been in power since the general election of 2014, retaining its control in a subsequent vote in 2019. Nationalistic sentiment seems more prominent than ever as the country goes to the polls again.

Since the rise to power of the BJP various Hindu nationalist organisations have seemed increasingly bold in their attacks on Christians and other religious minorities.

In our recent annual *Persecution Trends* report we noted the view of some that the nationalist Government is complicit in attacks on religious minorities by Hindu militants. If the current Government is re-elected this spring those extremists will have more power to act without consequence. There is

also a concern that attempts will be made to change the constitution.

Article 25 of India's constitution currently grants 'the freedom of conscience, the freedom to profess, practise and propagate religion to all citizens'. The final part of that definition is important, as freedom to 'propagate' faith means the freedom to evangelize.

'When the state is conniving with extremists it becomes very complicated'

Nevertheless, in many rural areas Christian pastors planting new gospel ministries have, over the years, faced violent opposition from Hindu extremists. In addition, more recently, there has been increasing concern as a number of Indian states have passed so-called anti-conversion laws. These have been used to target those sharing the gospel with people from a Hindu background.

One news report, at the end of 2023, suggested that in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh alone, as many as 400 Christians had been arrested in the three years since that state passed anti-conversion laws. Although intended to protect people from being forced to convert to another faith, the legislation has been used to oppose even prayer meetings and Christian relief aid.

Paul Robinson, Release International's CEO, said, *'We have heard people saying, "The India we knew is gone", which is a stark statement. At the same time the church appears to be growing in parts of India. Our prayer is that Christians in India will continue to live out their faith and remain true to the gospel of Christ, even in these trying times.'*

He continued: *'Over the years we have reported many stories of Indian Christians boldly sharing the gospel – and suffering the consequences. The willingness to suffer for proclaiming Christ is always flesh and blood evidence of the grace of God. From what we have seen and heard time and again, I believe the Indian church can handle pressure; but when the state is conniving with extremists it becomes very complicated.'*

A TIME TO PRAY

The Apostle Paul wrote that 'there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God' (Romans 13:1). Please pray:

- that whatever the electoral outcome in the next few weeks India's new government will uphold its own constitution and protect Christians who seek to practise and to 'propagate' their faith
- that Christians will remain faithful to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, even in the face of Hindu extremist intimidation and violence
- for Release International's partners in India as it seeks to support those who suffer for Christ



Decline of a nation's inclusivity

India wasn't always like this. Although militant Hindu fundamentalism has been around since the days of India's struggle for independence (it was a member of the Hindu paramilitary RSS group who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, primarily because of his support for India's minority faith groups), India has long been known for

inclusive diversity and celebrated for its secular constitution and its status as the world's largest democracy.

I first visited India in 2000 and lived in the southern state of Tamil Nadu for six months teaching English as a volunteer. I was just 19 at the time. One of the things that struck me then was how easily Christians and Hindus lived alongside each other. While the news at that time was increasingly dominated by clashes between Hindus and Muslims in northern India, and the long-running dispute with neighbouring Pakistan over Kashmir, it seemed that Christians were largely exempt from such strife. In the school where I worked two thirds of the pupils and staff were Hindu and the remainder Christians. They worked, ate and played together and staff of both faiths even lived together in shared housing. The Christians went to church on Sundays and the Hindus went to temple on Mondays and Thursdays, and they saluted the national flag together, as fellow Indian citizens, each morning. That was 24 years ago.

John Lawson

PLEASE HELP OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

In India and around the world today Christians are under increasing pressure from both hostile governments and militant groups.

Your gift can bring encouragement, pastoral care and practical support to our precious brothers and sisters in Christ.

Please make a gift today by using the enclosed form, calling 01689 823491 or giving online at releaseinternational.org.





Secret believers passionate about sharing the gospel

On a recent trip to Pakistan we met converts to Christianity who after dramatic encounters with God are trying to live out their new-found faith in a hostile environment. Here two of them share their inspiring stories

Shezhad* was a passionate Islamic preacher when he had a dream in which Jesus appeared to him as he stood beside a fast-flowing river. While another man was encouraging him to jump into the water, Jesus approached and put a hand on his shoulder and told him, 'follow Me'.

As he walked with Jesus he saw the nail scars in His hands. Shezhad recounts how Jesus then led him to a beautiful building filled with people

wearing white clothes and told him: 'You can sit here now that you are saved.'

We met Shezhad in the tiny flat he shares with his wife, 'Noor*'. Despite having very little – the couple have no furniture and are forced to sleep on the floor – they served us tea while we enjoyed a time of fellowship together.

Shezhad told us how he had been adopted at birth and was brought up

under the strict teachings of Islam, becoming an avid scholar. As a young man he became a passionate preacher for about eight years, seeking to live in a radical but peaceful way. At the same time, he felt an emptiness inside.

When a Christian friend who lived abroad shared the gospel with him he initially had rejected it and refused to speak about it again but, as time passed, Shezhad decided to look at the Bible online. As he read the Gospel of Luke he found himself transfixed by the beautiful words and the love he found within it.

Confused and questioning, Shezhad prayed for guidance for many weeks and it was during this time that God spoke to him in the dream. It was

'Shezhad', pictured with his wife, 'Noor', has left everything behind to follow Christ



now clear to Shezhad that Jesus was the only way to God but when he tried to enter a church he was not allowed because he was still outwardly a Muslim. Even though the pastor agreed to speak to him, sadly the church, perhaps fearing he was an imposter, did not welcome him. It was an experience that was to be repeated at three more churches, which left Shezhad feeling hurt and disappointed.

However, despite these rejections, his faith in Jesus increased and became strong. He watched videos online trying to learn more about the faith and how to grow as a believer and eventually made contact with a pastor who accepted and mentored him over the telephone. They spoke for one

to two hours almost every day and as well as encouraging Shezhad in his faith the pastor introduced him to a Christian woman who would eventually become his wife!

The couple are now part of a church but life remains difficult for them. When Shezhad became a Christian he left everything behind including his family. He now has very little contact with them; he knows that if they were to find out about his conversion, there would be serious consequences.

As well as the lack of contact with relatives, it is also difficult for him to make enough money to look after himself and his wife, which at times has made them anxious and depressed.

Thankfully one of our partners in Pakistan has been able to help the couple with their financial needs as well as to grow in their faith. Their heart's desire is to share the gospel and Shezhad hopes that at some point he will be able to study at Bible college and be involved in full-time evangelism.

ROOM FILLED WITH LIGHT

Another former religious leader we met was 'Andrew'*. Such was the security surrounding our visit to him that we had to wait until dark before entering his home – a single room in poor repair that he shares with his wife and two adult daughters.

Despite the challenges they face, Andrew, a former cleric in a mosque for many years, is grateful to the Lord for saving him.

When his daughter was 14 she became unwell and for the next three years he would take her to the doctor but without any improvement in her health. At the same time, as part of his role as a cleric he would visit the brick kilns to pray for the business with the owners. At one factory, he met a Christian who offered to pray for his daughter's healing. Initially he declined, but the man was persistent and said he would keep interceding for the girl until Andrew agreed to let him pray with her.

Eventually the family agreed and as

they gathered together with Andrew's daughter the man raised his hands and began to cry out with tears for her healing.

Andrew was amazed and challenged by the man's passionate prayers so he decided to join in and found himself praying in a different language.

As he did so, the room was filled with a light that fell on the girl. As it did so, she was healed, and, as he explained, his heart was changed.

'The cleric has become a magician'

For his own safety Andrew continued his work in the mosque for more than a year even after getting baptised but it became nothing more than a performance. Inwardly he knew he had become a follower of Christ.

He feared that if he was found out he would be killed so instead of directly preaching about Jesus he put words about Him on the gate at his home. Because of this he was called into a meeting by the religious leaders but was able to answer all their questions.

On one occasion a group of three or four young people visited his home with a hammer to remove the inscription from the gate but as they tried one of them accidentally hit one of the others with the hammer, which resulted in all of them falling on top of each other. It was said, 'The cleric has become a magician.'

Eventually, however, the local community became wise to his conversion and attacked his home, smashing up everything they could find. Andrew, however, managed to escape thanks to a group of Christians in another area who had heard what had happened and sent a car to rescue him.

Andrew continues to be largely a secret believer so that he is able to share the gospel with those who would ordinarily reject him, and as a former cleric he is well-equipped for the work. He said: 'Jesus brought me from the mosque. It was all His work. And now He is using me to extend His kingdom.'

*All names changed to protect identities.

Thanks to the S2S group Iffat can now help to provide for her family



A lifeline to escape poverty

Thanks to your generosity and kindness Strength to Stand groups are able to provide impoverished Christian women in Pakistan with help to set up their own small businesses

With the encouragement and support of a Strength to Stand (S2S) group, Iffat has been able to purchase a sewing machine and start a business repairing and making clothing. Her family was struggling financially and was not able to pay the bills, which led to the electricity at their home being turned off. Now she is able to make money to help to provide for her family. When she started the business she had only two orders per month; now she has more than 30! She thanks God for the S2S group and the huge help it has been to her to develop the business and improve her life.

Maqsooda (pictured) belongs to an S2S group known as 'Daughters of the Lord'. This has been a huge encouragement to her and has enabled her to take out a loan to begin a small business to help her family. Maqsooda buys snacks and drinks from a store and sells them for a small profit outside a school. With the profits she has been able to repay the loan and the income is helping her to provide for her family. She is hoping and praying that the business can grow.

Khalida (pictured) has been able to open a small shop with the prayers and support of the S2S members. She is thankful to God for this provision

and believes it would not have been possible without the S2S group. Because of this she is able to help provide for her husband and their six children and all of their families also. She is praying that this business can grow and she might be able to acquire a larger shop and even employ another one of the women from the S2S group.

Rani started a small business in 2022 with the support of her S2S group, 'God is Love'. She began by selling snacks in a local street, but now the business has grown and she sells BBQ items. Being part of the S2S group has been a huge blessing for her and she loves to meet other women, to worship and pray with them. She feels that she has grown in her faith and is able to trust God more. Recently, Rani has been unwell and so the business has been more difficult, but she has been thankful for the support and prayer of the group. She hopes she will be able to help others there to

start small businesses in the future.

Shariffa was able to begin a small business with the help of her S2S group. She buys vegetables from the markets and then sells them in the street. Her husband has a donkey and cart, meaning he is able to take the vegetables and sell them in other nearby locations. Together, they are making enough to support themselves and provide some help for their wider family. The S2S group has helped Shariffa to grow the business as well as encouraging her in her faith.

A S2S facilitator, who has been in the role for seven years, told us she is delighted to be *'a channel of change for the good of individuals, families and the wider community'*. She is working with another facilitator to support and develop more groups in their area. The latter told us she is blessed to have this opportunity *'to serve God and bring real transformation and social impact'*. She said: *'Many of the women [in the S2S groups] do not know their value, and we are able to help them see that they have many skills and enable them to make changes in their lives for the better, which can also make a difference in the whole community.'*

There are currently 31 groups in this area, many of which can now function without the input of the facilitators.



Khalida has been able to open a small shop with support from S2S members

Support groups not just for women

The Strength to Stand approach seeks to increase resilience and to protect the most persecuted, deprived and vulnerable Christian women in Pakistan. The groups have contributed significantly to empowering women and alleviating poverty in Pakistan as well as helping to improve women's spiritual, social, economic and leadership skills in the community.

This year there are more than 350 S2S groups in total in Pakistan, the vast majority of which are for women but there are also a few men's groups.

Christian men face a number of challenges, including extreme poverty and an inability to get stable work. Often they are mistreated and marginalised for being Christians. Many of those who do work are treated like slaves in the brick kiln factories so the thought of being able to pool some funds in order to support small business development is a great step forward.



Maqsooda



Shariffa

FACING PERSECUTION IN A 'CHRISTIAN' COUNTRY

Release International's partner helps those who have experienced persecution as a result of embracing the gospel
© Release International 2024

Converts to Christ in Ethiopia can face hostility from both family and community. Release International is helping to look after those who have paid a high price for coming to faith while at the same time supporting gospel outreach. On a recent trip to the country we met a number of these brave believers

The day 'Abeda'* came to faith in Jesus Christ was the joyous culmination of a difficult time in her life. The Ethiopian mother had been suffering from a life-threatening illness when she had a dream of Jesus.

As a result of her night-time experience she decided to put her trust in Christ and shortly after realised she had been miraculously healed! But the joy of coming to know Christ as her Saviour and Lord was quickly followed by her experiencing the cost of becoming a Christian from a Muslim background.

Abeda's husband kicked her and their six-year-old daughter out of the family home – and began treating his own daughter as if she had been fathered by another man. This brought Abeda into conflict with the whole local community. Shamed, ostracised and hated by her own family she and her daughter had to move away from the area.

Abeda's experience is not unusual. Despite the fact that Christianity is the largest religion in the country, there are parts of Ethiopia where Christians face the threat of violent persecution. In particular, those

who convert to faith in Christ from a Muslim background face opposition – sometimes violent – from their own families and the local community.

HELPING THE EXILES

'Mihret'* is a young Ethiopian woman who came to faith in Christ and, in November 2022, was baptised. Last year her sister, 'Genet'*, accepted Christ as Lord and was also baptised. At that point their brother realised his two sisters had become Christians and made preparations to kill both of them. The two young believers were forced to leave the community where they were living and move to a larger city as strangers and exiles. Both have missed out on schooling as a result of the whole experience.

More than 60 per cent of Ethiopia's 120 million population would be identified as Christian, with the majority of these being from an

Ethiopian Orthodox background. Evangelicals constitute about 18 per cent of the population, while Muslims are reckoned to account for about 31 per cent. Although Ethiopia enjoys full freedom of religion, in Muslim-majority parts of the country, particularly in the southwest and in the east, the threat of persecution remains for followers of Christ. In some areas Christian-owned properties, including church buildings, have been destroyed. Believers have been beaten and some have even been killed.

At the same time, since the start of the millennium Christians from neighbouring Eritrea, fleeing that country's oppressive, one-party regime, have ended up in refugee camps in northern Ethiopia. Release International partners have, over a number of years, supported those who have fled, providing practical as well as spiritual care and running training programmes to equip people to re-build their lives.

Now Release International is also partnering with another ministry seeking to reach out with the gospel to indigenous peoples in Ethiopia.

'The cornerstone of this work is equipping the evangelists'

One of the leaders of this ministry said: *'Muslims don't want to see Christianity in Ethiopia and are working for economic and political supremacy. We are under pressure.'*

Our partner, also supported by one of Release International's sister organisations in Europe, provides evangelistic training for frontline workers in different parts of Ethiopia, as well as supporting and sheltering persecuted Christians.

A number of churches have been planted in recent years and, our partners say, have seen thousands coming to faith in Christ. *'The cornerstone of this work is equipping the evangelists who come from different Christian denominations and different Islamic backgrounds. Many of them are former imams, Islamic teachers and former persecutors. These*



Baptising a new Ethiopian believer in Christ

believers are being added despite extremists persecuting them. They pass through difficult challenges. They have had houses and fields burned. Families pay a high price for their faith,' our partner said.

The work is reaching people of all ages and backgrounds. *'We are working with younger people and older people. We saw one elder who is more than 100 years old come to Christ!'*



Pray for gospel witness in Ethiopia

Our new partners in Ethiopia have a strong vision for seeing non-believers won for Christ but they, and those who come to faith, face significant challenges.

- **Pray for those being trained to take the gospel to unreached communities**
- **Pray for the Lord's protection of frontline workers in various parts of Ethiopia**
- **Pray for comfort and peace for those who have suffered for their new-found faith in Christ**
- **Pray that our partners will be adequately supported in order to rehabilitate and care for those who have experienced persecution**
- **Pray that many will come to know Jesus Christ through our partner's work**

A CHRISTIAN-FREE ETHIOPIA

At the same time, the challenge of mission is considerable. He said some people were *'working for a Christian-free Ethiopia. They sponsor young Christian girls to go to the Middle East – and many come back with a [new religious] identity. It is tragic. Many Ethiopian evangelical churches are not mission-minded. They don't plan for mission. This is our challenge. They are very narrow-minded. They don't see how wide mission is.'* A cross-cultural mission centre has been established, where the main purpose is to train and equip people who have a passion to reach their friends and neighbours with the gospel.

Other work has included providing motorcycles for church planters; supporting the education of children whose parents have come to faith; helping create micro-businesses for the spouses of church planters; providing Bibles for those who come to faith; and publishing tracts and discipleship materials. Those who experience persecution as a result of their change of religion are provided with practical support and rehabilitation.

** Names changed to protect identities.*



Release International helps to fund trauma-healing workshops

'We understand now that we were strengthened by the prayers of others'

After enduring intense persecution in their homeland Eritrean Christians are being helped by Release International's partner. Here they share their moving and inspiring stories with our team

'Grace* was serving in the Eritrean military when she was arrested after attending a house church.

Among the 30 believers detained with her in the capital, Asmara, was 'Mebrhit*'; but while the mothers and babies among the group stayed in the capital, Grace and Mebrhit were taken to Wi'a, one of the hottest places in the country, where they were to spend the next 15 months in harsh detention.

As well as suffering intense heat in the underground prison and being made to walk barefoot in the daytime as a punishment, prisoners were subjected to beatings in the night.

Grace described how the prison guards would take three of the women prisoners into the woods, then separate them a little way from each other so they would be beaten on their own yet still hear the cries of the other two. This particular

treatment was reserved for Christians only – intended to force them to renounce their faith before they lost consciousness.

'It was only by God's grace that we could stay strong,' said Grace. When the women regained consciousness they were asked again if they would renounce their faith and when they declined would suffer a further beating.

Thankfully the two women were able to stay strong spiritually by having fellowship together, praying and studying the pages of scripture they had been able to conceal.

Although they had been focused solely on overcoming the suffering, Grace said: *'We understand now that we were strengthened by the prayers of others.'*

Grace added that she had experienced God's presence in a special way while she was in prison. It seemed like the more she suffered, the more she

wanted to be close to God. Every time she encountered Jesus *'it was fresh.'*

The women were eventually transferred to Me'etr prison in the remote northwest of Eritrea where Grace would spend eight years. *'Me'etr is like a camp in the desert,'* she said. There was no torture and the women took the opportunity to share the gospel whenever they could, usually while making meals. As a result many others from various languages and religious backgrounds, including Islam, came to faith.

When eventually Grace's release came, she described it as a *'dream.'* Even up to the day before her release the guards had tried to get her to renounce her faith but the women refused in spite of being told that they would end up in a worse prison.

Mebrhit had been released earlier. Physically she was healthy but mentally she struggled to cope with the effects of the abuse. For some the toll of incarceration and torture continues long after their release. After she left prison Mebrhit suffered nightmares as a result of the trauma she had endured.

Others hang on to the special revelation God gave them while locked away. 'Joanna*', who had been imprisoned for many years, told us: *'When in prison, I experienced the love of God in a special way. You see darkness in prison on your own but the word of God becomes real, like you see God, you experience the love of God in your heart.'*

PRAY

- **That Christians in prison in Eritrea would stay strong in their faith and be released. Some have been behind bars for many years**
- **For healing for believers such as Mebrhit who continue to suffer the effects of trauma**
- **For freedom for the church in Eritrea**

HEART-FELT MOMENTS

Grace and Mebrhit gave some of their best years to God in prison, when ordinarily they may have expected to have been married and have children, writes team member 'Marian'*.

Neither of them mentioned this but it seemed to me to be a significant but silent sacrifice. Humanly speaking they won't get these years back.

I met Grace again a few days after our first encounter, at a church service. Even though she barely knew me, she embraced me and showed me genuine affection, which shall stay with me. She had more reason than most not to trust people but here she was showing a foreigner she had only just met real warmth. It was humbling and extraordinarily heartwarming.

Another woman became very upset when we asked how we could pray for her. I had taken some embroidered felt hearts with tags with Bible verses on made by a Release International supporter and when she said she just needed strength to go on, I reached into my bag and gave it to her. On it were words from Psalm 31:34: 'Be strong! God knew her needs.



An encouraging supporter-made gift

'OUR HIDING PLACE'

'Sophie'*, a mother of four, was arrested, then given 24 hours to leave Eritrea after the authorities discovered that her husband, 'Isaac'*, was from Tigray, the northernmost part of Ethiopia.

The family were dropped off at the border with Sudan by the authorities before making their way to Ethiopia. However, because she was Eritrean she first was forced to go to a refugee camp along with her young children while her husband had to go back to his home town.

Life has continued to be challenging: at one point they were able to open up a butcher's shop, which proved

initially successful but then customers turned away from them when they discovered they were evangelical Christians.

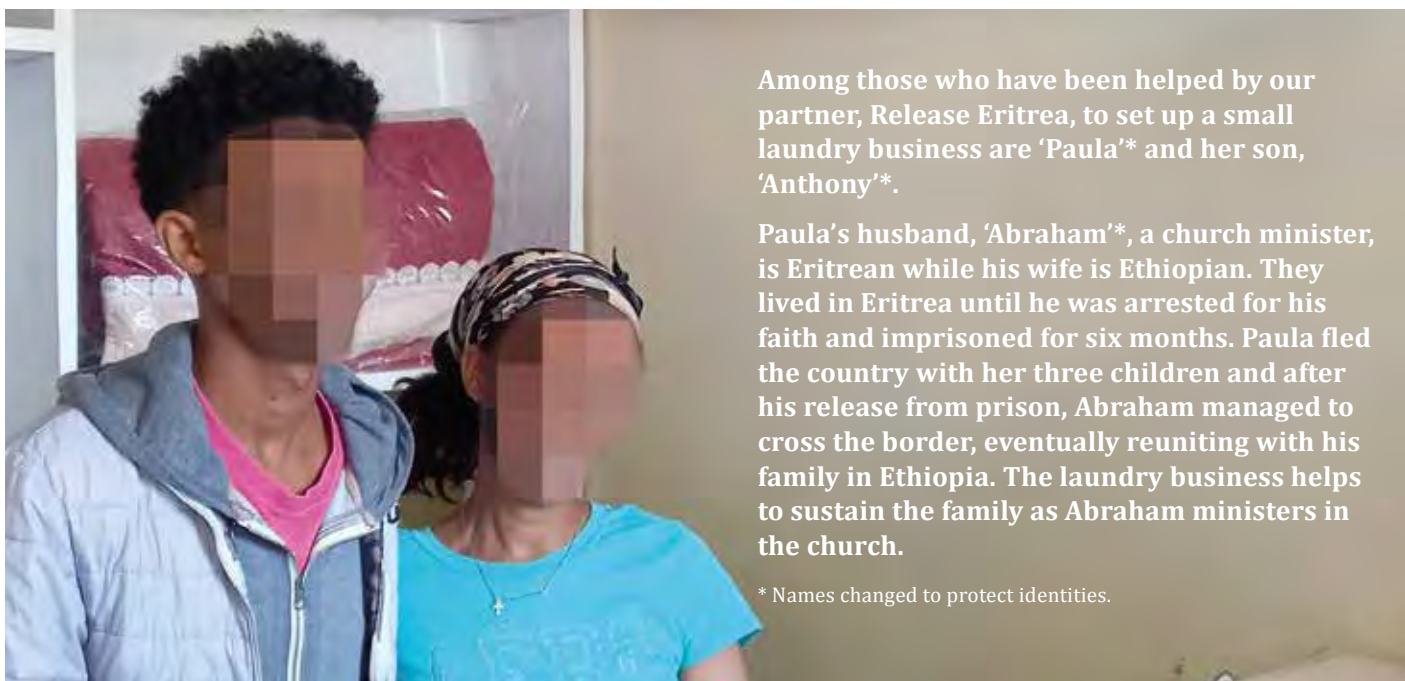
Sophie has faced significant trauma in her life, not the least of which has been rejection from her family who refuse to communicate with her. Locals in the strongly Orthodox area in which they live also do not trust her because she is Eritrean and do not help the family because they believe that evangelicals are paid by the US to follow Christ. As a result they have felt lonely and isolated notably after the start of the Tigray conflict involving Eritrea and Ethiopia.

However, although Sophie admitted to feeling suicidal at times, she has never thought of rejecting her faith, even when the Ethiopian authorities arrested Isaac on suspicion of being a spy.

Thankfully our partner, Release Eritrea, has recently been able to help Isaac to open a cycle repair shop in order to provide some income for the family.

The couple attend church together, where they are accepted. They described it as *'our hiding place. Church isn't perfect but we ignore the little things. We can also laugh at church!'*

* Names changed to protect identities.



Among those who have been helped by our partner, Release Eritrea, to set up a small laundry business are 'Paula'* and her son, 'Anthony'*.

Paula's husband, 'Abraham'*, a church minister, is Eritrean while his wife is Ethiopian. They lived in Eritrea until he was arrested for his faith and imprisoned for six months. Paula fled the country with her three children and after his release from prison, Abraham managed to cross the border, eventually reuniting with his family in Ethiopia. The laundry business helps to sustain the family as Abraham ministers in the church.

* Names changed to protect identities.



Standing with the prisoners

If you have ever been arrested you will know what an unnerving and worrying experience it is.

For many Christians around the world, however, arrest simply for expressing their faith is not uncommon and can often lead to imprisonment, sometimes without even a trial.

In the book of Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 3, we are challenged continually to remember those in prison and to identify with them, so this summer Release International will return to Christian conferences and festivals to share this call to action.

One infamous element of a prisoner's typical arrest experience is the mugshot. They are made to stand in front of a measuring scale holding a black number board and are photographed, catalogued and criminalised for following Jesus. Our exhibition stand will recreate something of this experience.

Surrounded by several banners profiling current prisoners of faith we will display a blank banner with a measuring scale background. Those who visit the stand will be invited to pick up a prisoner number card and have their photograph taken against the backdrop. The Polaroid shot will then be stuck to the reverse side of the prisoner card alongside the profile of a current Christian prisoner. We will encourage visitors to take the card home, keep it in their Bibles or fix it on their fridge, and commit to pray for that prisoner.

We will be attending Big Church Festival in May; all three weeks of the Keswick Convention in July; and Cedarwood Festival, ReFuel and Keswick Port Stewart in July. Additionally, we hope to be at New Wine that month and Bangor Worldwide in August. It will be great to see you there!

'Bold and shocking' play on tour

Due to tremendous success last year, Artless Theatre Company will be taking its stunning production, *If Prison Walls Could Speak*, on tour again this year.

Described by Premier Christianity Magazine as 'bold, innovative and shocking to the core', the one-man drama movingly portrays the story of Release International's associate ministry worker Petr Jasek, who was imprisoned in Sudan in 2015 because of his Christian work.

Following an overwhelmingly positive reception at New Wine United 23 last year we are pleased to announce a partnership with the Cedarwood Festival in North Yorkshire in July where the play will feature in the main venue. Church tours are planned in September and October covering England, Wales and Scotland.

If your church would like to host a performance, several dates are still available. Check out our website, releaseinternational.org, for further details and a Host Information Pack.

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

FABULOUS FUNDRAISERS

From singing to swimming, Release International supporters step up to help their persecuted family



Choir voice concern for oppressed

A carol concert in Northern Ireland raised a fantastic £1,500 for our work with persecuted believers. The event, which is performed every year by the King's Chorale group (pictured), was held at Albertbridge Congregational Church in East Belfast.

Release International was one of two organisations to be represented and to benefit from the fundraiser.

During the evening our Engagement Manager for Northern Ireland, Stephen McIlroy, shared about the work of the ministry in general while particularly highlighting the plight of Christians in India who are facing increasing oppression.

A big thank you to Albertbridge church and King's Chorale for such a wonderful evening.

- A special thanks also to supporter Anne Greig who completed a 22-mile swimming challenge over several weeks to raise more than £2,000, half of which will go to Release International.



Morning stars

A Christmas craft and coffee morning held by the women of First Ballyeaston Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland raised a total of £820 to help persecuted Christians.

Our thanks to members of the Women Together group at the church who put on the event.

Perfect match

We are delighted to report a very generous response to our recent campaign, which raised the voice of persecuted Christians facing oppression and violence around the world. Thank you to every supporter who made a gift and especially to the anonymous donors who provided £20,000 to match fund donations.

**Recycle this magazine:
share it with a friend!**



THE WORD

Like Jesus we must affirm the God-given dignity of all humanity, writes Archbishop Joseph D'souza, International President of the All India Christian Council

Helping the oppressed is vital to the Kingdom

A radical transformation to my life and ministry happened more than 25 years ago when God captured my heart for the plight of India's persecuted and most marginalised. Having previously dedicated my life to Jesus and to a life of outreach at the age of 17, I did my best to introduce people to Jesus and solidify their new faith. I believed Matthew 28:18-20 was my calling from God. I would go. I would make disciples. I would teach. I would baptise. It was meaningful work and I believe God was honoured and glorified by these efforts.

However, in 1998, all that changed. Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons were martyred in north India. Christians in India awakened to the possibility that the safety they had enjoyed was at risk. Both religious and ethnic minorities across the nation faced tremendous trials.

Seeking God's direction and protection, we gathered thousands for prayer. People came from all walks of life, but the poor and disenfranchised were the first to arrive. We learned from them on that day that the message of God we had been proclaiming for decades was insufficient. We offered them the hope of a future in heaven, but these tremendously needy and persecuted people needed Jesus in practical ways in their present day.

In my enthusiasm to embrace The Great Commission, I had

unintentionally ignored other scripture embracing the full Kingdom of God. After that critical prayer meeting, I, along with my colleagues, embraced Luke 4:16-21 as the way forward. Jesus had returned to his hometown of Nazareth and

May we imitate Jesus in our passionate advocacy for those who cannot advocate for themselves

began speaking to the people there by reading a prophecy from Isaiah. He declared that the scripture proclaiming good news, liberty, sight, liberty, and the Lord's favour for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed had been fulfilled through Him.

This was no ordinary reading of scripture on the sabbath by Jesus. This was a proclamation that the

long-awaited Kingdom of God had arrived. God's Kingdom would offer something for all people and every area of life would now be under the lordship of Jesus the King. The Risen King affirmed the God-given dignity of all of humanity inherent in their creation, including those who were rejected, marginalised, persecuted and demoralised.

Jesus would go on to advocate passionately for the suffering, and in his humility, his incarnation modeled a dramatic championing of the dignity of those the world deems low, unacceptable, or unworthy. Luke 4 was Jesus's mandate to the early believers, the early Church, and the Church today. May we imitate Jesus in our passionate advocacy for those who cannot advocate for themselves. May we use our relative privilege to proclaim liberty, recover sight, and free the oppressed, saying together in unity, 'Thy Kingdom Come'.

INSPIRING FAITH



'Clay is moulded into a vessel, but the ultimate use of the vessel depends on the part where nothing exists. I wish to become such a useful nothing.'

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.



At Any Cost:

The faithful witness of our persecuted Christian family

250 pages, full colour hardback, £25.00 (inc P&P)

- Published by our associate ministry, Voice of the Martyrs USA, who have provided us with a number of copies for Release International supporters in the UK
- Contains a visual feast of images from around the world where Christians are persecuted for their faith, including fold-out panoramic scenes
- Contact 01689 823491 to secure your copy at £25, visit our website estore (releaseinternational.org) or use the insert card



Regular support is vital

Regular giving (even small amounts) through a Direct Debit helps us to plan ministry support around the world. It is a great way to show ongoing love and concern for persecuted believers.

Yes, I want to partner with Release International

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Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?

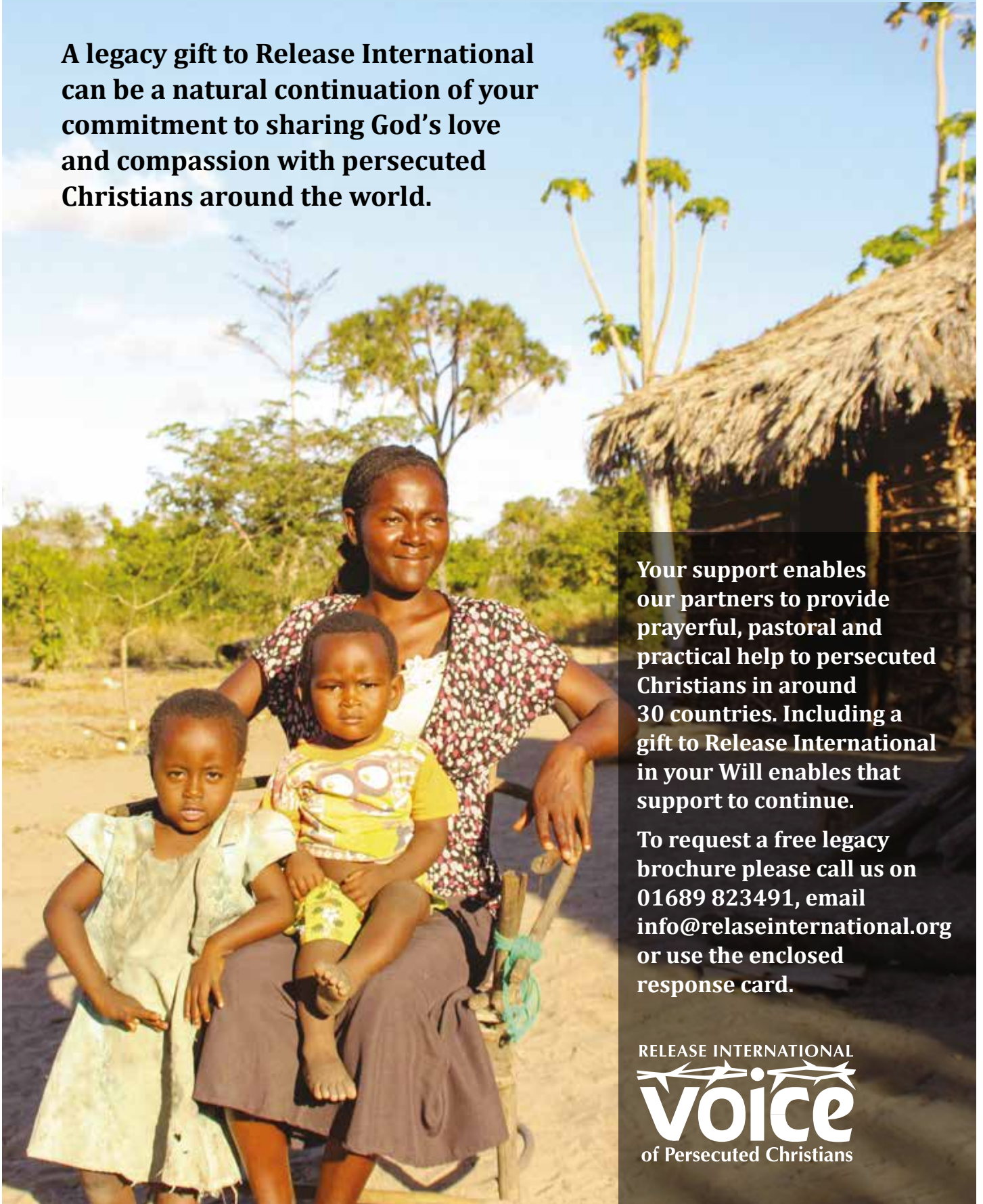
A legacy gift to Release International can be a natural continuation of your commitment to sharing God's love and compassion with persecuted Christians around the world.

Your support enables our partners to provide prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in around 30 countries. Including a gift to Release International in your Will enables that support to continue.

To request a free legacy brochure please call us on 01689 823491, email info@relaseinternational.org or use the enclosed response card.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

of Persecuted Christians



prayershield

April – June 2024



Pastor Hasitha has planted seven churches and established a rehabilitation centre for addicts in Sri Lanka

APRIL 2024

Heavenly Father,

Please remind my persecuted brothers and sisters that in every circumstance You are with them, holding their right hand and ready to help (Isaiah 41:13). May this bring them freedom from fear.

Help them to forgive those who harm them and resist the temptation to retaliate.

Give them wisdom to know when to seek justice and when to show mercy.

Lord, give them strength to endure suffering and protect them from despair. Please encourage their faith by revealing ways in which You are at work for their good.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

SRI LANKA

MONDAY 1: Pray for the retreat centre in Sri Lanka that is run by Release International partners. It is in need of maintenance, development and new staff with energy to take the work forward.

TUESDAY 2: Our partners are running workshops about religious freedom with lawyers and government officials. Pray that seeds would be sown to bring real change in the nation.

WEDNESDAY 3: Pray for our partners as they prepare to run a camp for more than 100 children of Christian workers from across the whole island. Pray too that the Lord would raise up a new generation of workers.

THURSDAY 4: Thank God for a Release International project that supports Christian teachers throughout Sri Lanka. Pray for

these workers as they invest in children and seek to make disciples.

FRIDAY 5: Pray for Pastor Manoharan who serves the Lord with the Assemblies of God church in Sri Lanka, caring for a large number of Christian families.

SATURDAY 6: Praise God for Pastor Hasitha of the Good Shepherd Church in Polonnaruwa. Despite serious opposition and harassment he has planted seven churches in a 30km radius and established a rehabilitation centre for young drug addicts.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians



Pray that new translations of the Bible in Iran's minority languages would reach those who are desperate for hope

SUNDAY 7: Praise God for Pastor Mayuradhn who was a Hindu priest violently opposed to Christianity before he met the Lord. Pray for his protection and encouragement as he now faces significant opposition in his ministry.

IRAN

MONDAY 8: Pray that God would grant wisdom, strength and guidance to our partner, 'Brother James', who leads a large network of house churches.

TUESDAY 9: Pray for the next generation of traditional and house church leaders in Iran whom James (see previous day) and others are nurturing and training. May they always seek God's will for their own lives and for those they lead.

WEDNESDAY 10: Pray for opportunities for underground Christians to meet and enjoy fellowship together in larger

numbers. May these meetings be protected and a great source of joy, encouragement and inspiration to those who attend.

THURSDAY 11: Pray for all those involved in producing and distributing Bibles in Iran's minority languages. May God's word always reach those who need it most and be a source of strength to them.

FRIDAY 12: Pray for our partner Operation Ephesians and its online counselling programme for Iranian women, many of whom have suffered abuse. May they know God's love and find strength and hope through this programme.

SATURDAY 13: Pray for the ministry of our partner, Operation Daniel, amongst Iranians in Turkey, many of whom have come to faith there but are now starting to experience persecution.

SUNDAY 14: Pray for Iranian

Christians who have left their homeland in order to flee persecution. May God sustain them, and may their faith be salt and light to all those around them wherever they now live.

INDIA

MONDAY 15: Pray for India's national elections throughout April and May. Please pray for peaceful voting, free of fear, an honest and accurate count and the election of leaders who will govern fairly for all Indians, including Christians and other minorities.

TUESDAY 16: Pray for those who have been displaced by violence in Manipur since May 2023 and that the members of the more than 550 churches which were destroyed can still find ways to worship and fellowship together. Ask God to heal their continuing trauma.

WEDNESDAY 17: Pray for all those pastors in Uttar Pradesh and other northern states such as 'Anish' and 'Mohan' who have been arrested or imprisoned. Ask God to grant them strength and courage, and pray that those persecuting them would repent and turn to Christ.

THURSDAY 18: Pray for pastors 'Joshua' and 'Rajendra' who have both been attacked by fanatical Hindu mobs and still carry injuries. Pray for their complete healing, for protection over their families and that God would convict those who attacked them.

FRIDAY 19: Pray that the Supreme Court of India will strike down various state-level 'anti-conversion laws' which are

unconstitutional, vaguely worded and have been deliberately designed to target Christians, even essentially banning two people praying or worshipping together in their homes.

SATURDAY 20: Pray for Pastor 'Harsh' and other pastors we partner with whose fellowships are now growing so much that they need larger places to meet, and yet are forbidden from opening or registering official new churches.

SUNDAY 21: Pray that the leadership of our partner Operation Philemon would enjoy great wisdom, courage and protection as they minister in a land of so much opportunity and thirst for the gospel and yet under so much pressure both from the state and Hindu fundamentalists.

MALAYSIA

MONDAY 22: Continue to pray for Susanna Koh who continues to be involved in court proceedings to uncover the whereabouts of her husband, Pastor Raymond Koh, who was abducted off the street in 2017.

TUESDAY 23: There is fear amongst many Malay believers, who are sensing an increased pressure on them to remain secret and silent about their faith in Jesus. Pray for strength and perseverance.

WEDNESDAY 24: Praise God that He is still working within this oppressive culture, and that many from Islamic backgrounds are continuing to embrace Christianity.

THURSDAY 25: The authorities recently sent a memorandum to local bakeries, forbidding them from using the words 'Merry Christmas' on cakes. It is alleged that it was against legal Halal requirements. Pray that common sense would prevail.

FRIDAY 26: The challenges of house church meetings remain high, especially among those who are ethnically Malay. Please pray for protection and an unfailing faith.

SATURDAY 27: Pray for new converts, many of whom struggle with pressure to lay aside their newfound faith, and pressure to engage worldly behaviour.

SUNDAY 28: The majority of those who embrace Christianity, display an overwhelming desire to be baptised. Please pray for them as they make plans to do this discreetly, or secretly.

SOUTH SUDAN

MONDAY 29: Pray for our partners who are supporting those who have fled persecution and are struggling to survive. Philip is a blind boy who lives with his grandmother and brother. He said: 'My family and I live by God's grace. We do not have any external support except the church.'

TUESDAY 30: Julia is crippled and has five children. Her husband is a soldier. She told our partners: 'His salary is never enough and almost never comes on time. We are so grateful for your visit and for providing for the needy like us.'

MAY 2024 CHINA

WEDNESDAY 1: Praise God that our partner was recently able to distribute 150 Bible MP3 players in China. This is a secure way for believers to access the Bible and other Christian material.

THURSDAY 2: Pray for all those who attended our partner's recent training event for Chinese Christians. Many of them have experienced persecution as a result of their faithful witness. Pray for their healing from the trauma that they endured in China.

FRIDAY 3: Deacon Jia Xuwei (left) of Early Rain Covenant Church recently suffered a broken rib while being detained by



national security agents after attending a graduation ceremony held by the church. After being released Jia's landlord was pressurised by the police and he was forced to move out.

SATURDAY 4: Elder Hao Ming of Deyang Qingcaodi Reformed Church was originally detained in November 2021 on a false allegation of fraud. The authorities are urging him to confess in exchange for his freedom but he has maintained his integrity and refused.

SUNDAY 5: Pray for Elder Zhu Longfei and four other Christians who were prosecuted last year on charges of 'illegal business



Pastor Wang Yi faces a sixth year in prison separated from his family

operations' for printing devotional material for use in their church. Pray they will be released soon.

MONDAY 6: Continue to pray for Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church who is now spending his sixth year in prison separated from his wife, Jiang Rong, and their son, Shuya.

TUESDAY 7: Give thanks for the work of Release International's partner, ChinaAid, led by Bob Fu. Pray that they will continue to speak boldly on behalf of Christians who are being silenced and oppressed by the Chinese Communist Party.



Bob Fu, founder of ChinaAid, which speaks up for persecuted believers

PAKISTAN

WEDNESDAY 8: Pray for 'Farman' and his family who are living in a safe house, having been forced to leave their home because of the threat of severe persecution.

THURSDAY 9: Pray for Christians in Jaranwala where a mob destroyed 23 churches and set fire to 80 houses last August. Many people are still recovering from the trauma and buildings still need extensive repairs.

FRIDAY 10: Violence towards the Christian minority is often fuelled by false allegations of blasphemy. Pray that believers throughout Pakistan would continue to stand for truth.

SATURDAY 11: Praise God for a Release International partner sharing the love of God with Muslims. Give thanks that he was able recently to facilitate a new secret church building in the province of Sindh.

SUNDAY 12: Pray for 'Azmet'

who will be responsible for leading this new church in Sindh (see previous day). May the Lord give him wisdom and courage to lead diligently.

MONDAY 13: Pray for Christians who have lost their jobs because of their faith and for Christian children facing bullying in schools.

TUESDAY 14: Pray for new believer 'Hazeem' who was recently baptised. His employers are mistreating him because of his new faith. Pray for him as he works out plans to set up his own food-making business.

EGYPT

WEDNESDAY 15: Pray for the economic situation in Egypt which is having an increasingly adverse impact on Christians already suffering from poverty.

THURSDAY 16: Pray for Release International partners providing aid to impoverished Christians, particularly in the more rural areas of Upper Egypt. Pray the help will reach



Jaranwala witnessed shocking violence against Christians last summer. Photo: Aid to the Church in Need

the families most in need this year.

FRIDAY 17: Thank God for the impact practical aid has on the faith of those receiving it. After a Release International partner built a concrete roof on one family home to prevent large rats getting in at night, the mother 'burst into praise that the Lord has never left her in need, and that He responds to her deepest needs even before she asks'.

SATURDAY 18: One mother recently helped by our partners, who has a strong relationship with the Lord, shared that 'my dream is to raise my children in better conditions than my own; to invest in their education and their spiritual growth so that they know and live for the Lord'. Pray this will happen.

SUNDAY 19: Pray for Christians who are facing increased pressure because they have been accused of siding with Israel in the Gaza conflict. Some women have been pushed out of queues while seeking to collect sugar rations for their families, being told to 'go and live in America'. Pray for an end to the conflict and the increased tension between Islamic and Christian communities in countries such as Egypt.

MONDAY 20: Thank God for the work amongst women carried out by Release International partners running the Strength to Stand ministry. Many testify to the increased spiritual and economic resilience the

groups give them.

TUESDAY 21: Thank God that during a Release International visit to partners in Egypt last year we were able to pray for a girl who had just been abducted and two hours later received news that she had been returned. Please pray for the many girls in Egypt who are not returned to the families.

SOMALIA

WEDNESDAY 22: Praise God for the growing number of Somalis who are turning to Christ and particularly that God is bringing whole families to Himself.

THURSDAY 23: Pray for the ongoing need for more places to worship in secure locations to accommodate 'large numbers' of Somali believers.

FRIDAY 24: Pray for those impacted by the recent suicide of a Christian woman and for our partners who bring comfort in these difficult situations.

SATURDAY 25: Pray for Somali Christian brothers and sisters who have been helped to start up small businesses. Pray that their enterprises will be fruitful and provide much-needed income for their family needs.

SUNDAY 26: Pray for an opportunity that is opening up to offer eyecare as a form of meeting need among Somalis as well as providing a small income for those involved. Pray for God's

blessing on the training which will take place during the coming months.

MONDAY 27: Pray for the Somali diaspora in other parts of Africa where there are more opportunities to hear the gospel. Pray that the Lord would use these opportunities to speak to their hearts and draw them close to Him.

TUESDAY 28: Pray for the gospel work through the media and particularly radio ministry to reach Somalis. Pray for the right content and for the resources that are necessary to reach a wide audience.

ETHIOPIA

WEDNESDAY 29: Praise God for a new partnership we have established with an Ethiopian organisation that is sharing the gospel in strategic locations. Pray for protection for its workers who make Jesus known among un-reached communities in Ethiopia and beyond.

THURSDAY 30: Pray for those who have come to Christ recently and face open hostility from family and community. Pray that they will stand strong and grow in their new-found faith.

FRIDAY 31: Pray for the underground churches that our partner planted last year. Pray particularly for the Muslim-background leaders who are being trained in Bible teaching and evangelism.

JUNE 2024

AFGHANISTAN

SATURDAY 1: Give thanks for 'Adam' who heads up a Release International partner ministry seeking to see vibrant communities of Jesus followers among the people of Afghanistan.

SUNDAY 2: Pray that many would tune in to the live radio and TV programmes broadcasting the gospel into Afghanistan and that there would be a significant response to the gospel.

MONDAY 3: Pray for the ongoing financial and logistical needs of our partner's vital media ministry (see previous day). Broadcasting into Afghanistan is often expensive and complex.

TUESDAY 4: Pray for the strengthening and encouragement of the small, often secret gatherings of Afghan believers within the country.

WEDNESDAY 5: Pray for 'Jamal' and 'Rasa', believers with a heart to reach other Afghans. Please pray that the Lord would lead them as they consider options regarding where they should be based.

THURSDAY 6: Pray that the Lord of the harvest would raise up more workers in Afghanistan. There is a particular need for more mature Afghan Christians with a heart to serve.



Pastor Dmitry supports an underground network of churches

FRIDAY 7: Give thanks for the opportunities that Afghan Christians have to meet together online. Pray that these virtual gatherings would help them to grow and become mature in Christ.

UKRAINE

SATURDAY 8: Pray for the trauma-healing retreats our partner runs for Ukrainian Christians in Poland. Those who attend had been targeted by Russian forces in the occupied or previously occupied areas of Ukraine.

SUNDAY 9: Pray that God will enable our partner to connect with Christians in the newly liberated areas of Ukraine who have faced detention, interrogation and torture and are in critical need of pastoral support.

MONDAY 10: Pray for the frontline Christian workers Release International supports in warzone areas. They are involved in evangelism and providing humanitarian aid. Praise God that despite the desperate situation many Ukrainians have come to faith.

TUESDAY 11: Pray for Pastor Dmitry, a church leader who was arrested, interrogated and kept in appalling conditions for eight days shortly after the Russian invasion in 2022. He was later forced to flee the country with his family.

WEDNESDAY 12: Pray for Pastor Dmitry's ongoing ministry supporting an underground network of churches in Melitopol. There are around 120 people meeting in homes

and several teenagers have come to Christ.

THURSDAY 13: The ongoing war is taking a huge toll on the church in Ukraine. Pray that the Lord will give our brothers and sisters the grace to persevere and that the global body of Christ will not grow tired of remembering them.

FRIDAY 14: Pray for Maciek who leads Release International's sister ministry in Poland and is involved in several projects supporting Ukrainian believers. Pray for wisdom and protection for his team.

CENTRAL ASIA

SATURDAY 15: Pray for a Release International partner who is currently travelling throughout Central Asia, training pastors and encouraging churches, often in the midst of opposition.

SUNDAY 16: Pray for the distribution of good quality theological books, resources and literature to pastors and missionaries throughout Central Asia.

MONDAY 17: Praise the Lord for the dedication of pastors in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan who persevere and continue to serve the Lord despite having spent time in prison for their faith.

TUESDAY 18: Thank the Lord for 'Yuri' and 'Olesya', a faithful missionary couple planting churches in Kyrgyzstan. Their home has

been extended to become a new missionary station enabling their ministry to expand.

WEDNESDAY 19: Praise the Lord for new believers in Kyrgyzstan, recently baptised by Pastor Yuri. Pray that they would continue to grow and become established in their faith.

THURSDAY 20: Pray for Aytbek Tynaliyev who was convicted of 'inciting religious enmity' for sharing his faith on social media and questioning the authorities' religious policies. He was imprisoned in Kyrgyzstan for six months in 2023.

FRIDAY 21: Pray for religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan. There are new proposals from the Government to make the Religion Law even more restrictive with all religious activity requiring state registration.

LEBANON

SATURDAY 22: Please pray for peace in Lebanon and that there will not be further escalation of violence across the border with Israel. Remember particularly those recently displaced from their homes in border areas.

SUNDAY 23: Pray for our partner Operation Ruth as it ministers to those who have fled from numerous wars in the region. Pray that the team would be able to offer hope and love as well as providing practical support.

MONDAY 24: Pray for our partner Operation Isaiah and its work with Syrian and other refugees in Lebanon. May those who have been displaced by conflict discover God's love for them in Christ despite the suffering they have experienced.

TUESDAY 25: Pray for all those affected by the economic collapse and soaring prices in Lebanon. Many are going hungry as the prices of basic necessities have risen beyond what most can afford.

WEDNESDAY 26: Pray for those who have come to faith from Muslim backgrounds and face particular challenges in developing their new faith identity while preserving their cultural identity. May they always know God's love and find believers with whom they can experience true fellowship.

THURSDAY 27: Pray for all Christians and churches in Lebanon as they seek to follow Christ, help to care for the 1.5 million-plus refugees living among them, heal from the trauma of past and neighbouring conflicts and rebuild their own fractured nation.

FRIDAY 28: Pray for our partner Operation Ruth and especially for its child, youth and education programmes which are raising a new generation in Lebanon to treat people of all faiths with respect and end the cycles of religious mistrust, hatred and persecution.



One ministry in Bangladesh is seeing new believers coming from various religious backgrounds. Stock photo

BANGLADESH

SATURDAY 29: Pray for a ministry in Bangladesh with a heart to reach every corner of the country with the gospel which is seeing new believers coming from Muslim and Hindu religious backgrounds. Ask God to bless these young Christians for whom day-to-day life is often very hard.

SUNDAY 30: A ministry in Bangladesh (see previous day) which seeks to

Sources: ChinaAid; Release International partners and contacts; VOM Korea

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.

encourage disciples has a vision to build a discipleship-training school. Please pray the leaders would have wisdom as they develop this idea and that God would provide a good plot of land for them to start construction.

Lord Jesus,

Thank you that Your victory on the cross means that I can come boldly into your presence to ask for what I need (Hebrews 4:16).

Soften my heart so that I can rejoice with my persecuted brothers and sisters who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Help me to be earnest and faithful in prayer for them.

Cause them to find favour in the eyes of those in authority so laws restricting Your people from expressing their faith are repealed and others are able to receive salvation without fear of retribution.

May Your kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen

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