



# voice

OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

**HELPING  
OPPRESSED  
CHRISTIANS**

Regaining paradise for Christ  
**Persecution Trends 2026**  
Singing for the suffering  
**New awareness-raising campaign**

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
  
**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians

# WELCOME

PAUL ROBINSON, CEO



## WELCOME TO A NEW YEAR! I DO HOPE YOU HAD A BLESSED CHRISTMAS SEASON.

As 2026 begins some of us will make new year resolutions (maybe even a repeat of last year's that weren't kept!); for some it may be a decision to eat a healthier diet or to go to the gym. Generally they involve giving up something we know is not good for us or taking up something we know we should do but have always struggled to achieve.

Around the world today Christians are having to make ongoing resolutions that I suspect look somewhat different to ours.

For many it will be a resolution to keep going in their faith in the face of intense persecution. For some it will be to keep forgiving and loving those who have caused them immense pain and suffering.

Perhaps a resolution we can each make this year is to stand with them in a deeper way: to commit more often and for longer in prayer for them (which is the first thing they ask us for); to support them in other ways by highlighting their stories to our church fellowships so they can pray and support too; to raise funds or to give more regularly or more generously.

### PERSECUTION TRENDS

In the January edition of *Voice* magazine we always publish a survey undertaken with our partners looking back on the previous year and how what has been happening can indicate what lies ahead for Christians in the coming 12 months.

This is not just for information. As you read you may notice that a number of our partners ask for prayer. Please do take a moment at these points to respond to their requests. The restraints of magazine space and protecting identities often mean we cannot go into detail but the need (and plea) for prayer – sometimes involving matters of life and death – is real.

### LIGHT IN THE DARKEST PLACES

Inspired by the faith and courage of our persecuted family we are adopting a special ministry theme to guide our events, activities and materials in 2026 called 'Light in the Darkest Places' (see page 21).

We will be suggesting some creative ways in which your church can get involved in the coming weeks so please do look out for more details.

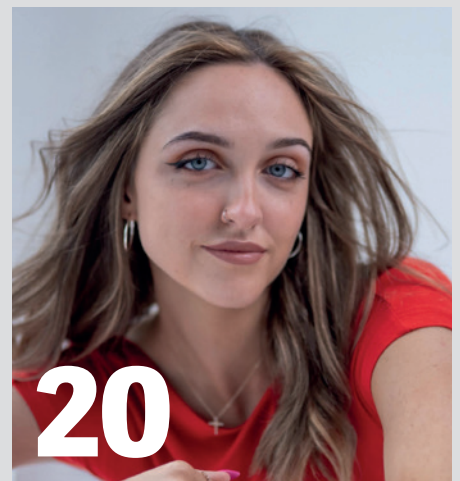
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**'I THANK GOD THAT WORKING WITH RELEASE INTERNATIONAL HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE TO HELP MANY PASTORS' FAMILIES.'**  
**(SEE PAGE 13)**

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
  
**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians



Release International helps Christians in the UK and Ireland to engage actively 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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# Falsely charged Christians freed

## LAST YEAR SAW RELEASE OF SEVERAL BELIEVERS



Zafar Bhatti was released in October

## BLASPHEMY ACCUSED DIES SHORTLY AFTER ACQUITTAL

Long-term Pakistani prisoner of faith Zafar Bhatti died shortly after being released from prison in October.

The former pastor died of a heart attack just two days after being acquitted and set free.

Zafar had been in Rawalpindi's Adyala Central Jail since July 2012, when he was charged with sending blasphemous text messages – charges he always denied.

Release International's CEO Paul Robinson said: 'This is very sad news to hear, so soon after Zafar's release from prison. We would ask supporters to pray for his widow.'

Zafar was arrested after a local Islamic leader filed a complaint, saying he had been sent messages from an unregistered number, insulting the mother of Islam's prophet, Mohammed. The police later arrested Zafar and it is understood he was tortured to extract a confession, but he insisted on his innocence. Several reports at the time proved that the phone SIM referred to was not registered to Zafar, but was, in fact, registered to a woman who was later arrested, charged, but granted bail. She died in November 2016 from Hepatitis C.

Zafar eventually came to trial in 2017, with proceedings being conducted inside prison because of security threats. In May 2017 he was sentenced to life imprisonment. In December 2021 this was increased to the death sentence.

While in prison Zafar experienced pressure from other prisoners to convert to Islam and was beaten several times. His wife, Nawab, struggled to make ends meet after her husband's arrest. Release International partners have regularly visited Nawab over the years, providing support.

Among prisoners of faith who were released towards the end of last year was Deacon Jang, a Christian who had worked on the border of China and North Korea.

He spent 11 years behind bars after being kidnapped from China in November 2014 and sentenced to 15 years in a North Korean prison.

Jang (also known as Zhang Wen Shi) had been ministering to North Koreans who crossed the border into China and had seen a number of them come to faith in Christ.

He had been working in the town of Changbai, alongside fellow Korean-Chinese pastor, Han Chung-Ryeol. Although it is illegal to cross into China without permission, North Koreans often visit border towns to buy goods or medicine.

Jang had regularly provided hospitality for those doing so and disciplined those who came to faith, teaching them how to share the gospel with loved ones when they returned home.

Release International's partner for Korea said: 'We believe the reason for his kidnapping was to gather information about the North Korean ministry work we were doing with Pastor Han.'

Fifteen months after Deacon Jang's kidnapping and arrest, Pastor Han was lured from his home in Changbai and stabbed to death.



Deacon Jang spent 11 years behind bars



Zhang Shaojie thanked Christians for their prayers and support

## CHINESE PASTOR RETURNS HOME

After his release from prison in November, Pastor Zhang Shaojie, from Nanle county in China's Henan province, expressed his deep gratitude for the prayers and efforts by the global Body of Christ for his freedom and his family during his 12 years' imprisonment.

He said: '... coming out of prison during this month of Thanksgiving has been full of God's grace — I have seen the Holy Spirit's presence every day. I am deeply grateful for the help and support of the international community; otherwise, I might not be here today and might have been "disappeared".'

Pastor Zhang was detained in November 2013 following a dispute with local government authorities over a plot of land that his church had the legally acquired rights to.

He and other church leaders had been planning to have a new church and ministry centre built on the land. The year after being detained he was charged with 'gathering a crowd to disrupt public order' and 'fraud'.

Church members believed the authorities had targeted him in order to obtain the land and to prevent the ministry of the church from growing.

Announcing his release from prison, Release International's partner for China said: 'We rejoice at his freedom, but we continue to pray for him and his family as the Chinese Communist Party has installed a large number of facial-recognition cameras around his home and has not allowed anyone to visit.'

## Listen to our latest podcasts



**Singing for the Suffering** In this episode we welcome Aimee Thompson, a 27-year-old musician and student from Northern Ireland. Amy shares her unique journey of faith, influenced by her upbringing as a minister's daughter, and how her isolated time in London strengthened her relationship with Jesus. She discusses her new collection of Christian songs, the inspiration behind them, and her goal of using her musical talents to support Release International. Amy's story includes her experiences studying music, a pivotal year of illness that deepened her faith, and her recent project to raise funds for persecuted Christians. Tune in to hear clips from Amy's songs and learn how you can support her efforts.

**Andrew Brunson: Prepare to Stand** Arrested in Turkey and imprisoned for two years, missionary Andrew Brunson faced isolation, despair and what felt like the silence of God. In this powerful conversation, he opens up about the spiritual crisis that shook his faith – and how that silence became the doorway to deeper intimacy with God. Andrew reflects on the political and religious forces behind his imprisonment, why he believes pressure on Christians is rising in the West and how believers can prepare for testing times ahead. This gripping testimony reminds us that God's silence is never his absence.

**Nigeria: Face-to-face with suffering** In this episode we speak to Release International's Charlie Frank after his first visit to Nigeria. Listen as he shares about his initial impressions of the country, about preparing himself to hear distressing stories and about the encouragements of meeting both Release International partners and Christians who have suffered – and who are persevering in their faith



## INDIAN CHRISTIANS CLEARED OF CONVERSION CHARGES

India's Supreme Court has quashed all criminal proceedings against Christians falsely accused of mass religious conversions, delivering a scathing rebuke to authorities for using the criminal justice system as a 'tool of harassment of innocent persons'.

Justice J.B. Pardiwala and Justice Manoj Misra's 158-page judgment in October vindicated Pastor Vijay Masih of the Evangelical Church of India in Fatehpur, dozens of staff members from the Broadwell Christian Hospital, officials of the Sam Higginbottom University of

India's Supreme Court vindicated Christians who had been falsely accused

Agriculture, Technology and Sciences (SHUATS) in Prayagraj, and others named since April 2022 under Uttar Pradesh state's anti-conversion law.

*'The criminal law cannot be allowed to be made a tool of harassment of innocent persons, allowing prosecuting agencies to initiate prosecution at their whims and fancy, on the basis of completely incredulous material,'* the court observed.

The vindication comes after the acquittal in Uttarakhand state of the first Christian charged under its 'anti-conversion' law. Pastor Nandan Singh was cleared after a four-year battle.

The ordeal for the Christians in Uttar Pradesh state began in April 2022 when Hindu extremists from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) surrounded Pastor Masih's church service, locked the gates and called police, alleging that 90 Hindus were being forcibly converted to Christianity. Pastor Masih was arrested along with 35 other Christians and, though initially released on bail after three days, he was re-arrested in October 2022 and remained in jail for more than 100 days.

## Nigerian priest dies in captivity

An Anglican priest in Nigeria, who was abducted with his wife and daughter, has died in captivity, leaders of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) announced late November.

Rev Edwin Achi, his wife, Sarah, and daughter were kidnapped on October 28 from Nissi village, Chikun county, in Kaduna state. Church leaders did not say how he died, but the abductors had demanded a ransom of 600 million naira (£315,000).

Anglican leaders said in a press statement that his death was a 'painful loss to the entire diocese, the clergy, the church family and all who were blessed by his faithful ministry, humble spirit and unwavering devotion to the service of God. We continue to pray for the release of his wife and daughter still in the hands of kidnappers'.

The announcement of the priest's death came as the Nigerian President, Bola Tinubu, ordered the recruitment of 20,000 security personnel to be added to the existing force of 30,000 following a wave of mass kidnappings.

## Family's fears for young woman

Relatives of a 21-year-old Christian woman in Pakistan who disappeared from her home in November said they are heartbroken and fearful after she resurfaced in court claiming she had converted to Islam and married her Muslim neighbour.

Monica Jennifer's brother said he believes she was blackmailed and coerced into abandoning her Christian faith and family.

*'She was a Spirit-filled Christian girl, devoted to her faith,'* said Raza Arif, 27, of Rawalpindi, Punjab province. *'There is no way she would willingly choose to leave her home, her religion and her family without pressure.'*

Arif said a Muslim neighbour abducted her and manipulated and blackmailed her until she felt she had no choice but to leave.

When she failed to return home from work on November 17, relatives immediately reported her disappearance to police that evening, said Arif, a Pentecostal evangelist whose father is employed as a sanitation worker.

*'But instead of registering our complaint, they told us to come the next morning,'* Arif told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News. *'Our First Information Report [FIR] was registered on November 23 only after some rights activists intervened, giving the accused sufficient time to marry Monica after forcibly changing her faith.'*

(Source: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News)

**SIGN UP TO RELEASE**



**HELPING OPPRESSED  
CHRISTIANS**

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing glasses and a yellow top, is speaking. She is positioned in front of a background of green foliage with some red flowers. The text is overlaid on the image.

**THE COST OF  
WINNING PARADISE  
FOR CHRIST**

HOSTILITY AGAINST  
CHRISTIANS IN  
SRI LANKA TAKES  
MANY FORMS, WRITES  
**STEPHEN MCILROY**, WHO  
RECENTLY TRAVELLED TO  
THE BEAUTIFUL ISLAND  
NATION TO SEE FIRST-  
HAND HOW RELEASE  
INTERNATIONAL'S  
PARTNERS ARE HELPING  
STRUGGLING BELIEVERS

**L**ocal schoolteacher Kumuduni Athapattu, a Christian who lives in a predominantly Hindu village in northern Sri Lanka, faces marginalisation herself but also revealed that *'many people who become Christians are scared'*.

Following the country's devastating 27-year civil war, which ended in 2009, some communities were relocated into war-affected regions under a government-run resettlement policy. Mrs Athapattu, her family and village were forced to settle in an area in the north of the island, where, thanks to the help of her church fellowship, she was able to begin working in education.

However, it has proved to be a challenging vocation; in her first school there was not a single other Christian teacher with whom she could have fellowship. Nevertheless, she has seen the gospel spreading within her locality, which is dominated by Buddhism and Hinduism, although she is aware that new believers continue to be worried about being ostracised and are *'scared of the community'*.

At the same time, many of her students are achieving strong exam results. This grants the school a level of prestige and seems to have endeared Mrs Athapattu to her colleagues as they have noticed something different in her character and nature. Her story is an exception though, particularly as schools often choose not to employ a Christian teacher even though they are obliged to provide one for Christian students.

Indeed, I met other Christian teachers who have endured constant hostility and isolation from their fellow staff members, and many who receive no salary. Others are not permitted to have a classroom of their own even if it becomes available.

Although Mrs Athapattu receives help from Release International partners, she feels marginalised and unsupported by the authorities and local religious figures. She despairs that resources, financial help and certain other privileges are deliberately withheld from Christians.

“  
**EVERY TIME WE  
FACE A DIFFICULTY,  
GOD HEARS OUR  
CRY AND PROVIDES'**

Schoolteacher Kumuduni Athapattu says  
that many who turn to Christ are scared

## HELPING OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS



Pastor Jonathan testifies to God's generous provision

In contrast, Release International partners are able annually to bring together Christian teachers for times of group encouragement, fellowship and training. During these events they are able positively to influence one another while drawing strength from the knowledge that their situations are not unique.

These annual gatherings are key in helping teachers to deal with not only the discrimination they face but also the dark powers of witchcraft and demonic oppression that pervade their areas.

Thankfully churches are often the refuges where *'they see freedom'* for the spiritually oppressed.

Of course it is not only Christian teachers who face opposition. Local pastors more than anyone are at the receiving end of hostility, which comes from several sources.

One of those who has faced numerous challenges and struggles is Pastor Jonathan, who, despite being threatened, says that *'God helped me through and enabled me to do my ministry'*. In the face of extreme poverty and trials and being let down by others, he testifies to God's generous provision.

Many would have quit under such circumstances but Jonathan told us that he perseveres because he believes that

*'God spared our lives from all danger, and our hearts are filled [with] His love [so] we want to spread His love amongst the non-believers and also make them know there is one true God'*. Despite the challenges and trials, the members of his church continue faithfully to support their pastor and attend Sunday and midweek services.

After praying, the Holy Spirit prompted Jonathan to remember that ministry was a calling from Heaven and that God would provide. Despite opposition from Buddhists and Hindus, he was supplied with a new church building for his fellowship to meet in. He joyfully reflected that, *'every time we face a difficulty, God hears our cry and provides'*.

### TRANSFORMING LEADERS

Another church leader has had to battle a different sort of opposition. Pastor 'Isaac' was *'threatened by the police'* and then forced to spend a large amount of money on the subsequent court case. He continually faces threats from locals demanding that he demolish his church, which is still not completed, as well as opposition from the police and religious militants, all of which has stalled the construction.

Previously, the church had held

“**CHURCH WORKERS OR PASTORS ARE ATTACKED AT NIGHT'**

worship services in the home of the pastor but it had been attacked and as well as damage to the property a number of believers had been injured.

Pastor Anojan and his wife, Sajina, face similar challenges. There have been several false accusations and threats against them but they have persevered and seen a number of locals come to faith in Christ. As a result the church has grown to about 100 members.

However, Anojan told me that these false allegations were having an impact on the couple's ministry and that, sadly, within the area of their church building, *'the children are scared to attend our Sunday school'*.

Nonetheless, they are grateful for the tremendous encouragement and support they receive from Release International's partners, who facilitate regular training programmes to empower pastors better to handle relationships, resolve pastoral issues, overcome difficulties and recognise the vital importance of prayer.

Another local church leader echoed the importance of this training: Pastor Johnson said that the sessions made him feel like he had 'been transformed'.

## MIRACULOUS HEALING

Shiv Sena is a political party primarily active in Maharashtra state, India, that is known for its strong advocacy of Hindu nationalism. Founded in 1966 it emerged as an activist group addressing the



Pastor Johnson said that our partners' training had made him feel like he had 'been transformed'

grievances of disenfranchised youth who blamed immigrants for their economic struggles. It has evolved into a significant political force in India, promoting a fundamentalist interpretation of Hinduism and, in recent times, has become active in the northern part of Sri Lanka where its oppressive activity is being felt by Christians.

One of those who has been targeted by this group is 'Roshin'. Roshin, who is used to interruptions and disturbances during church services by both the police and Hindu militant groups, said: *'Many times some of the Shiv Sena people called me and threatened me... and each time I told them to come and meet with me in person and talk to me directly but they never came.'*



Anojan is grateful for the encouragement and support of Release International's partners

That intimidation was made all the worse recently after the wife of a senior Shiv Sena leader was miraculously healed during a church service and *'in turn she trusted Jesus as Saviour.'*

In the Jaffna region, there is a constant sense of discrimination – from the withholding of the needs of Christian schoolchildren to the denial of access to building permits. A local pastor and his wife, who insisted on remaining anonymous, spoke of the manipulation generated by Shiv Sena in continuing to oppose ministry-related work.

In contrast to the construction of new Buddhist or Hindu temples, Christians experience the constant denial of approval for church buildings, even though they could be used as community centres or hostels for the good of all.

At the same time the couple told me that a Christian friend had recently been approached by members of a Hindu fundamentalist group on motorcycles, one of whom carried a spear. They threatened to kill him if he continued to witness for Jesus and preach the gospel.

They added: *'Sometimes in our area church workers or the pastors are attacked at night or in the darkness.'*

Church buildings have also been targeted with roofs set alight in an attempt to burn them down.

Pastor 'Akashan' has seen his church destroyed seven times but on each occasion he, his wife and children have repaired the building themselves. In fact, so determined is he to see the church continue that, undeterred by this opposition, he has personally educated and trained a number of young students because the cost of attending theological college is so expensive and beyond the means of many.

Naturally, though, these incidents greatly impact the physical and mental health of many church leaders and their families. However, even as they face threats, attacks and discouragement, they continue to follow their calling and faithfully minister to their congregations and the local population.

Names in inverted commas have been changed to protect identities

• All photos © Release International 2026 unless otherwise stated

## HELPING OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

# ENABLING THE CHURCH TO STAND IN THE YEARS AHEAD

For more than 20 years we have partnered with an evangelical organisation in Sri Lanka that provides vital help and encouragement to persecuted believers, particularly pastors.

Church leaders are under pressure for a variety of reasons. Persecution of Christians is an intense issue, and a daily reality to be dealt with by many pastors and ministry workers, especially in rural areas. It can lead to significant trauma, anxiety, stress and burnout. There are other challenges too, including economic hardship and discrimination directed at pastors' children.

Release International's current projects include support for persecuted pastors, providing ongoing training and facilitating peer support to increase resilience in the church.

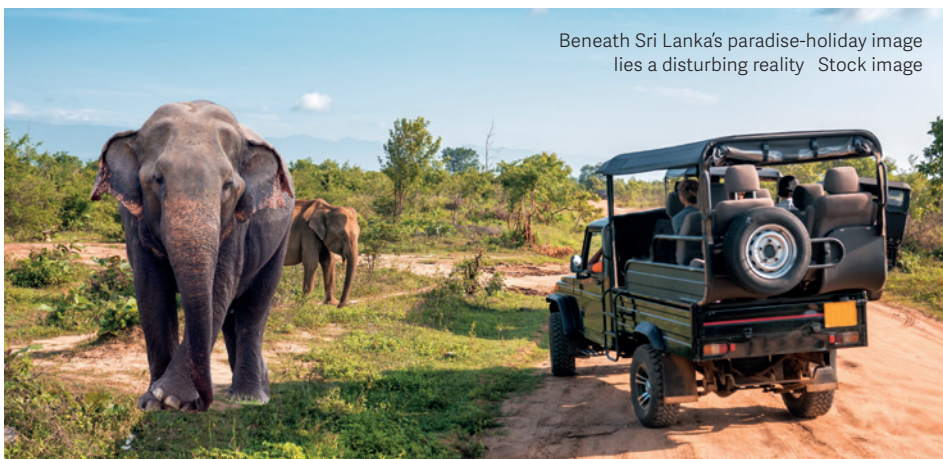
Our partner said: *'We need to really concentrate on bringing pastors out of this trauma and ministering to them and bringing them wholeness and healing, not only through the practical training programmes, but also with the love of Jesus Christ in their lives.'*

Another project exists to defend and empower persecuted churches, ensuring that they can continue to minister faithfully and effectively. Pastors are trained to understand their rights under the law and constitution, while our partner provides vital legal support when needed.

## NEXT GENERATION

Alongside this, we are investing in the next generation of Christian leaders in Sri Lanka. Children of pastors are helped to access education while being encouraged in their faith. An annual children's camp for them is always a highlight, providing a unique platform for growing faith and friendships.

Christian children are supported and encouraged through a project that supplies teachers of Christianity in schools throughout the nation. These



devoted workers not only provide Christian education but play a vital role in nurturing faith, offering spiritual guidance, encouraging discipleship and acting as role models for young believers.

## DARK UNDERBELLY OF TOURIST DESTINATION

Sri Lanka is a beautiful country, known for its golden beaches, elephant safaris and its rich religious, cultural and ethnic diversity. It is a wonderful place for a holiday, but a challenging place to be a Christian, especially in rural areas that are predominantly Buddhist or Hindu.

Even though religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution, it is not something that is enjoyed by the religious minorities, including Christians, who face persecution from many sides.

Sri Lanka is a melting pot of religious diversity, with Buddhists making up approximately 70 per cent of the population, Hindus 13 per cent, Muslims (predominantly Sunni) 10 per cent, Roman Catholics 6 per cent, and Protestant Christians just 1 per cent, with evangelicals an even smaller percentage.

Recent decades have seen a significant rise in Buddhist nationalism, and the emergence of extremist factions holding strong anti-minority sentiments. Discrimination, intimidation and violence are regularly directed towards Christians.

The problem of religious extremism in Sri Lanka has been exacerbated by the rise of radical Islamic and Hindu groups, which have systematically and violently targeted Christians, while state authorities perpetuate hostilities,

using ambiguous laws to exert control.

In this atmosphere of escalating intimidation, social and legal pressures, children are being denied access to Christian education, while burial rights for Christians are often restricted. At the same time foreign mission workers are increasingly being arrested and deported.

## HEAVY BURDEN

When congregations attempt to build even on land that they own, permission is frequently denied, while the process of registering a church is often problematic. At the same time there are instances of church buildings being looted and set on fire, worship gatherings being disrupted and Christians being falsely accused, threatened and attacked.

Pastors and their families often bear a particularly heavy burden, with the outworking of their faith being a source of strength but also a point of vulnerability.

However, despite the hostility and opposition, Christians throughout Sri Lanka remain resilient and committed, not only to survive but to thrive.

## HOW YOUR SUPPORT HELPS

Thanks to the generosity of Release International supporters our partners organise and facilitate conferences for pastors where they can enjoy fellowship, training and discipleship as well as gain a better understanding of their legal rights.

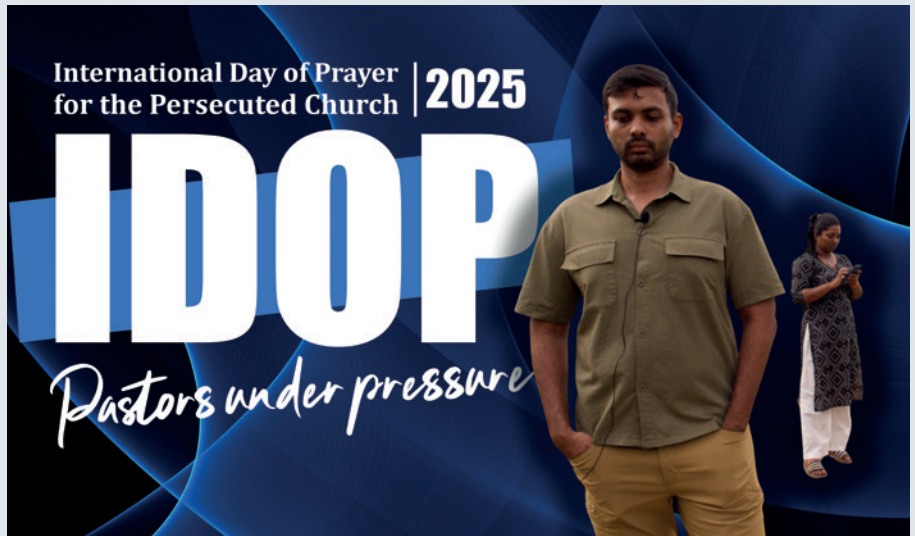
They leave refreshed, encouraged and empowered to know how to deal with the endless barrage of false accusations and threats made against them and how to repair strained community relationships.

# PASTORS UNDER PRESSURE

Last summer I travelled to Sri Lanka with a small film crew, visiting pastors in Colombo and Jaffna, the latter a Tamil region still marked by the scars of civil war (writes 'EM'). We were there filming *Pastors Under Pressure* for the International Day of Prayer, capturing how believers hold fast to Christ amid opposition and uncertainty.

I was struck by how deeply ethnicity and religion are intertwined in Sri Lanka: the Sinhalese are Buddhist, the Tamils Hindu. Only Christianity brings these two communities together and perhaps that is why it threatens both. In the south, churches face hostility from Buddhist nationalists; in the north, a rising tide of Hindu extremism has begun to take hold, influenced by movements across the water in India.

You really appreciate the daily spiritual battle that Christians are in but also how God breaks through. In a land overshadowed by witchcraft, animism and trauma from decades of conflict, God often reaches



people through signs and wonders – healings, visions and words of knowledge. Miracles, our partner said, were a “day-to-day occurrence”.

Yet, as was the case with Jesus’ first disciples, who also witnessed the miraculous, the greatest need, he said, was discipleship: depth, integrity and spiritual formation that can withstand persecution. Referencing writing by a Release International associate ministry, he told us: “Wherever there was proper

*discipleship, where the church was taught and the church was prepared to face persecution, the church grew”.*

The pastors we met carry both faith and fatigue. Yet they are being quietly strengthened – through legal aid, mental health care and teaching that roots them more deeply in Christ. It was so encouraging to see how this Release International-supported work is equipping the church in its time of need.

## PLEASE HELP OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

In Sri Lanka and around the world today Christians face hostility from a number of different sources: militant religious groups opposed to the gospel, hostile authorities, local communities and sometimes even family members.

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](http://releaseinternational.org).





Some pastors and churches have had to evacuate from the frontline in Ukraine as the Russian army has advanced  
Stock image

## PERSECUTION TRENDS 2026

**As the gospel spreads and impacts more lives Christians around the world are bracing themselves for a year of increased persecution from repressive governments and religious militants. In this year's Persecution Trends report Release International partners describe the challenges Christians endured in the past 12 months and look ahead to the coming year**



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## EUROPE

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### UKRAINE

Under the Russian occupation, Ukrainian Christians have to meet underground in small groups. The only exception is for those who receive Russian citizenship and re-register under a restrictive Russian religious law. At the time of writing the situation in the occupied territories resembled the Soviet Union era.

In order to avoid being imprisoned or killed some pastors and church fellowships have had to move from the frontline areas as the Russian army has advanced.

Persecution is increasing for two reasons, said our partners: Vladimir Putin's regime has established the so-called 'Russian World' in the conquered territories and it does not tolerate any opposition, especially in the religious sphere; the other reason is the war waged by Russia has intensified and become more brutal.

In 2026, they said, Ukrainian Christians in the occupied territories will be pressured to deny their Christian identity and become loyal citizens of Russia. If the war continues into 2026 Ukrainian Christians ministering along the frontline will be in danger of losing their lives due to extensive Russian drone activity. Russians trace Christian workers and their vehicles as they minister in the remote areas.

Our partners fear that persecution will only increase in every aspect as the Russians become more ruthless. *'[As Putin's] power starts crumbling ... he will do anything possible to eliminate any opposition within his sphere of influence.'*

They said: *'Pray for endurance and steadfastness for our team and our partners in Ukraine as the war has taken its toll on all of us. Ukrainians are tired and traumatised. Pray for wisdom and resources for us to respond to the needs, and pray for the war to end.'*

Our partners held two trauma-relief retreats for Ukrainian Christians suffering as a result of persecution and the war.

*'Release International has played a big part in our ministry. It sponsored our frontline ministry and trauma-relief ministry. We're very thankful for this... and for the prayers of British Christians.'*

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## CENTRAL ASIA

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The persecution of Christians and church ministers is expected to remain broadly unchanged in 2026 except for probably Kyrgyzstan, where a deterioration is likely, and in the Russian Federation, where an intensification of persecution is all but certain.

*'The creation and implementation of new laws ... have impacted the lives of many thousands of evangelical*

*Christians, grossly violating their civil rights and further restricting religious freedom,' said our partner.*

*'As a result, not only has the official state registration of new churches become impossible, but the existence of previously registered churches has also been put at risk.'*

However, he added that there had been an improvement from a human rights perspective in Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan. *'The lives of Christians and the ministries of churches have changed significantly for the better, although this cannot be called complete freedom.'*

At the same time, he noted a sharp increase in pressure on evangelicals in Russia and Belarus.

He added: *'I thank God that working with Release International has made it possible to help many pastors' families.'*

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## SOUTH ASIA

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### INDIA

During 2025 Christians endured various forms of persecution including violence, threats and harassment. Churches were destroyed, pastors falsely imprisoned and home meetings and prayer for healing banned.

The situation is likely to deteriorate in 2026, as Indians continue to turn to Christ, thereby antagonising militant elements of the majority Hindu population.

One pastor who with his family was severely injured by a mob in Rajasthan in 2024 and then had false charges filed against him by the attackers, is on bail. Our partners ensured he and his family received hospital care and are currently covering his legal fees.

*'Persecution is increasing because the nationalist Government is complicit in all these attacks by Hindu fanatics. All these actions are left unchecked and, in fact, openly encouraged by those opposed to Christians and other minorities,' said our partners.*

*'In the coming year we are likely to see more arrests and perhaps more raping of Christian women and even*

## PERSECUTION TRENDS 2026

The rise of the Hindu Nationalist BJP Government has coincided with an increase in Christian persecution



*martyrdom. More imprisonments are expected as well as Christians being displaced or forced to flee their homes.'*

In June 2025 a mob accompanied by local officials in Rajasthan attacked a Christian shelter for women, accusing the organisers of fraudulent conversions and exploitation.

This incident reflects a surge in assaults on Christian entities in the state, fuelled by its new anti-conversion law. In one village, several pastors were arrested, stripped and publicly abused.

Our partners said: *'Please pray for us and for believers across India as we face worsening persecution.'*

According to United Christian Forum statistics for 2025 at least 50 incidents

of persecution occur across India every day with only about 5 per cent reported.

Another partner cited the example of 12 Christian families being forced to flee into the jungle after an attack. Through the help of a Release International associate ministry they were resettled.

*'Looking ahead to 2026, Christians are likely to face continued bans on evangelism, church meetings and even private worship. Economic hardship is expected as believers are denied access to markets, workplaces and agricultural opportunities, especially with local and state elections fuelling further polarisation,'* it said, adding: *'State and central government policies, including anti-conversion laws, have led to*

*destruction of churches, displacement of entire villages and growing fear. Yet, persecution has brought spiritual unity, deeper faith and greater dependence on God.'*

## SRI LANKA

Christians faced various forms of persecution in 2025, with legal and administrative restrictions on the rise while physical violence remained sporadic. The mandatory registration requirement for churches continued to pose an existential threat, as many smaller congregations could not meet the restrictive conditions, such as owning the property where they worshipped.

Local authorities and extremist Buddhist or Hindu groups frequently

used these regulations to pressure churches to close or stop meeting.

Release International's partners said: *'Persecution remains constant in its underlying nature but is changing in form. While the number of reported incidents has slightly declined, from 54 in 2023 to 51 in 2024, and 39 between January and October 2025, the methods of pressure have evolved. Overt violence and direct threats have reduced, but legal and administrative restrictions are intensifying, particularly through the enforcement of mandatory registration requirements for churches and gathering of information by local authorities.'*

At the same time, pressure is increasing from Hindu extremist groups which are becoming more organised, and are systematically targeting churches.

However, the main drivers of persecution against churches – religious extremism and a state preference for Buddhism – remain deeply entrenched in society. Buddhist and Hindu extremist groups continue to oppose Christian worship and mobilise local hostility, often influencing authorities to act against churches. The state's policies and practices grant privilege to Buddhism, creating structural barriers for Christian congregations to operate freely or obtain registration for their places of worship.

Our partners said: *'In 2026 Christians are likely to face increasing pressure from extremist groups, alongside tightening state restrictions. Hindu groups have become more active in the north and east. These movements, together with militant Buddhist actors, are expected to incite local authorities to act against churches under the pretext of enforcing registration requirements. There is also a growing risk of mob violence, as unregistered churches are increasingly portrayed as "illegal".'*

Arrests and imprisonments could occur if the Government took a harsher stance on enforcing church registration.

*'Pray that [Christians] will remain steadfast; pray too for the hearts and minds of pastors' and ministry workers' children, who often face neglect and marginalisation.'*



Rev Mark Mukan thanked UK Christians for being a 'lifeline amid the storms'

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## AFRICA

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### NIGERIA

Christians faced severe and escalating forms of persecution in northern Nigeria last year, primarily in the form of violent attacks by Islamist militant groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) and Fulani herdsman extremists.

Our partner, Rev Mark Mukan, reported: *'These include targeted killings, the burning down of churches, kidnappings for ransom and forced displacement from farmlands and villages, often framed as "farmer-herder clashes" but with clear religious motivations against Christian communities.'*

In June a wave of attacks in Plateau and Benue states by Fulani militants left more than 200 Christians dead and thousands displaced in a single week, destroying homes, farms and churches in targeted Christian areas such as Mangu and Bokkos. These assaults, linked to escalating farmer-

herder tensions amid drought, saw militants chanting jihadist slogans, forcing survivors to flee with nothing and crippling local economies and church attendance as fear gripped communities.

*'Our teams distributed aid to 150 affected families, but the trauma lingers, with children even afraid to go to school.'*

According to reports from the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law (Intersociety), more than 7,000 Christians were killed in the first 220 days of 2025 with hundreds more kidnapped, tortured or displaced.

*'The increase in persecution stems from the unchecked expansion of jihadist groups, fuelled by ideological opposition to Christianity and Western influence,*

**“  
2026 COULD SEE  
MARTYRDOMS  
DOUBLE IF  
GLOBAL SILENCE  
PERSISTS’**

## PERSECUTION TRENDS 2026



Militant Fulani herdsman are responsible for many Christian deaths

alongside government inaction and inadequate security responses.

*'Sharia [Islamic law] in northern states continues to marginalise Christians as second-class citizens, leading to discrimination in jobs, education and justice, while climate-induced resource scarcity exacerbates herder-farmer conflicts with a religious tint, as militants exploit these for targeted violence against Christian villages.'*

He estimates that in 2026 Christians in the north are likely to face intensified pressures from ongoing jihadist insurgencies. Blasphemy laws may see stricter enforcement, resulting in mob lynchings and arbitrary arrests, while economic hardships and climate change will heighten resource-based conflicts. Political instability could further erode religious freedoms, as highlighted by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom in its 2025 report.

*'We foresee heightened risks from cross-border incursions by Sahel-based jihadists spilling into Nigeria and expect*

**“  
DESPITE THE  
VIOLENCE  
CHURCHES  
HAVE KNOWN  
EXPONENTIAL  
GROWTH’**

*more Christians to be martyred, with projections exceeding 2025's 7,000 deaths if trends continue. Without swift action, 2026 could see martyrdoms double if global silence persists. More displacements are anticipated, as attacks have already forced millions into IDP (internally displaced person) camps.'*

He added: *'Pray for divine protection for Christians; that Nigerian leaders would prioritise security and prosecute perpetrators without bias; and for spiritual strength and unity among believers.'*

He described the prayers and support of UK Christians as *'our lifeline amid the storms'*.

## BURKINA FASO

Persecution generally is increasing, said our partner. *'Christians are particularly targeted for attack, kidnap and arbitrary detention. At the same time terrorist attacks are multiplying, despite the efforts of the Government.'*

In 2026 Christians may face attacks on places of worship (many have been burned or closed and believers killed during services); forced displacement and abandonment of homes or villages (numerous Christians have had to flee) and psychological pressure and constant fear (repeated violence creates a permanent climate of insecurity).

Our partner said that arrests and imprisonment, notably of church leaders, were highly probable in 2026 because the state and armed groups were using arbitrary arrests more frequently. Cases of martyrdom were likely to increase given the growing number of attacks.

Intensifying raids by armed groups in the north and east often targeting majority Christian villages and churches had forced many to flee. That trend is likely to continue.

*'These events create a climate of fear ... fragmenting the Christian communities,' said our partner, but added: 'Despite the [violence], churches have known exponential growth thanks to education, food and spiritual projects (including the distribution of local-language Bibles and other evangelism materials).'*

## MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

### IRAN

Christians directly involved in ministry were a particular target for the authorities in 2025.

*'There is obviously a campaign to try to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those leading house churches and those involved in evangelism and teaching,' said our partners.*

*'Persecution is increasing because the authorities are aware of the growth in the number of converts and house churches and are determined to stem this. Their goal is to exterminate the Persian-speaking church and allow only the Christian-minority groups to operate. Longer prison sentences are being given to Christian workers.*

*'There is no doubt that the Government is concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians [but] they are not willing to accept and acknowledge the rights of those who have converted.*

*'Believers can also face opposition from family or harassment in their work or studies.'*

They said that converts and especially leaders and ministry workers were likely to face increasing pressure in 2026.

*'The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in their [homes] do not know if they are under surveillance or not. These pressures have led to an exodus (mainly to Turkey) and this is likely to continue in 2026. However, many Iranian refugees in Turkey are finding it increasingly difficult to stay and some are facing deportation back to Iran.*

*'Pray for the protection of the house churches; for the training of new ministry workers; and for Christians in prison, especially those under lengthy sentences.'*

### IRAQ

The Kurdistan region of Iraq has become a refuge for persecuted Christians including Muslim-background believers

Iraqi Christians have found sanctuary in Kurdistan  
Stock photo



(MBBs) fleeing violence, discrimination and threats from across Iraq and beyond.

Our partners provide humanitarian and spiritual support to persecuted believers, while the regional government provides a degree of protection and freedom of worship not found in other parts of Iraq. However, despite the comparative safety, persecution continues to affect believers within and beyond the region.

In southern and central Iraq persecution remained severe in 2025, especially for MBBs. Evangelism and conversion from Islam are considered crimes under Iraqi law. The Government and Sharia (Islamic law) do not recognise the right to change one's religion so those who convert may be prosecuted, imprisoned or face other punishments.

Persecution often comes from families, tribes and local communities. MBBs face rejection, and even death threats from their relatives or neighbours. As a result many live as secret believers.

Our partners said: *'Some European countries have begun returning Iranian and Iraqi asylum seekers to their home*

*countries, putting their lives in great danger. Many of them have nowhere to go and face possible arrest, violence or death if they return.'*

Even in Kurdistan itself refugees and MBBs face extreme difficulty obtaining legal recognition or residency. MBBs often face discrimination and social exclusion, while many persecuted believers have no jobs, income or access to education or healthcare.

*'Years of displacement, fear and rejection have deeply affected their mental and emotional health. Pray for protection for all persecuted believers in Iraq and Kurdistan.'*

## ALGERIA

The exodus from the country of a number of church leaders has had a significant impact on the faith of many Christians.

In 2025 the authorities sealed off a church in Bejaia, bringing the total number of sealed churches to 16. At the time of writing the implementation of a decision by the Council of State to remove the seals on six churches was awaited, while about 15 church leaders and officials were still being

questioned, with others systematically being searched at ports and airports in Algeria.

The Bible Society in Algeria was still unable to release about 6,000 Bibles that had been blocked at the port of Algiers for more than three years, despite promises from the authorities. These Bibles were imported legally with the authorities' permission.

Our partner said: *'Persecution remains constant and I am hoping that it won't get worse in 2026. The reason is that the authorities continue to prosecute Christians for holding unauthorised worship and are refusing to grant the Protestant Church of Algeria official registration.'*

While fearing that there would be further court cases, job dismissals and harassment in the coming year, our partner believes that the authorities are putting pressure on the churches and their leaders in order to stop the *'phenomenon of evangelisation and conversion'* of Algerians.

However, our partner added: *'The persecution has pushed several leaders to leave the country and this has shattered the faith of many Christians.'*

## PERSECUTION TRENDS 2026

The Taliban monitor the population's observance of Islamic practices



## SOUTHWEST ASIA

### AFGHANISTAN

Christians face threats from the Taliban, local devout Islamic leaders and from families. Fear and shame have often led the third group to use violence to force family members to renounce their faith.

Our partner said that persecution was increasing. *'In Islamic law, converting to Christianity is considered a crime, especially under the rule of extremist groups such as the Taliban.'*

Our partners expect that in 2026 Christian families, who have to practise their faith in secret, will continue to be hindered in raising their children according to their beliefs. *'In public their children are trained as Muslim children, which is very sad.'*

The Taliban, using local community leaders, monitors every region to check

how strictly the population is following Islamic law and question, harass and even imprison those it believes are not complying.

Our partners expect more arrests and imprisonments in 2026 and more Christians to be forced from their homes.

Another partner said: *'Some Christian workers in Afghanistan have been arrested and held in jail without any legal support. One [person], who was caught with a copy of the Bible, was forced to state on media that he only accepted Christianity to get financial benefits. There are others who have been arrested in Afghanistan, and no one knows what has happened to them. Believers who live in the region genuinely feel fearful about their safety and wellbeing and feel more and more under threat.'*

### PAKISTAN

Since 2016 the recently banned Islamist party, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), has persecuted Christians across the country, especially in Punjab province. In the

past two years believers have been falsely accused of blasphemy and even killed.

The TLP's agenda is to kill Christians who do not convert to Islam; to seize the property of Christians by falsely accusing them and to blackmail them by threatening to accuse them of blasphemy.

*'At the same time, as a Christian you are not given your rights in educational institutions, government and private offices and all other areas of life, which creates fear and insecurity,'* said our partner. However, he added that longer term he believed that *'there will be a decrease in persecution against Christian in Pakistan'*.

This is because the Government recently took action to ban the TLP. *'[This] is a ray of hope that there will be a decrease in persecution. Please continue to pray and thank God.'*

However, when it came to discrimination he was less optimistic. *'It is a mindset of the majority people to treat Christians as second-class citizens.'*

*'We feel under pressure living in Muslim'*

areas, especially in villages or brick kilns, which are feudal, and when interacting with the police and courts.'

Christians are vulnerable in these environments where girls and women are often sexually abused. Last year our partner enabled three families to escape the bonded labour of the brick kilns.

Christians are denied jobs and admission to educational institutions, while the lack of influential representation in Government means that development work in Christian communities is minimal.

Thankfully, however, our partner expects fewer arrests and imprisonments this coming year.

## EASTERN ASIA

### CHINA

*'The Chinese Government is trying to eradicate the church,' says Dr Bob Fu, of ChinaAid, Release International's partner.*

*'Even under Chairman Mao it acknowledged that the church could not be totally destroyed but today it is trying to do just that.'*

*'Persecution against Christians is at its worst since the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has banned children under 18 from even going to church.'*

*'Students, CCP members, civil servants, law enforcement and even doctors and nurses are now prohibited from going to church or holding their beliefs in the workplace.'*

*'Millions of Chinese Christian children for the first time since the Cultural Revolution have been forced to sign a form to renounce their faith in public in front of students and teachers. This is a national trauma for millions of Chinese Christian children.'*

He added: *'We have also seen under President Xi Jinping all the government-sanctioned church pastors having to make a public pledge not only to be dedicated to the doctrine of communism and socialism in their teaching in the church but also to pledge their absolute allegiance and personal loyalty to Xi.'*

Bob Fu says the Chinese church is engaged in a true spiritual battle



In 2025 the CCP launched its most systematic and aggressive campaign against the urban house church networks such as Beijing Zion Church.

Tithes and offerings were also criminalised. Dr Fu said: *'Pastors have been arrested and indicted and some have been given lengthy prison sentences. This is the new trend of persecution. It is a true spiritual battle. The CCP has launched a war against the Christian faith. President Xi apparently takes a very strong approach with the aim of eradicating the church.'*

### NORTH KOREA

The clearest cases of persecution are not the ones that appear in western or even North Korean media, reports our partner, but the *'ones the North Korean Government does not publicise.'*

*'It can provide credible evidence for foreign missionaries' subversive acts and can dismiss outlandish reports of Christians being steamrollered to death or mass executions in a soccer stadium but it does not quite know how to craft a narrative for incriminating a citizen whose only crime was possessing a Bible.'*

*'So, according to what we hear often through our sources, the authorities tend to deal with such Christians quietly, showing up at their house in the middle of the night and hauling them and their*

*families off to a concentration camp or to be executed.'*

It is a different story for North Koreans living over the border in China. Beijing's main interest with regard to female defectors is to get them to stay in China and perform the role of a wife or mother within a local family. However, if they try to escape, the authorities do not shy away from sending them back to North Korea.

Surprisingly, they encourage them to engage in religious activity among themselves as long as they stay in their place of residence in China with their families and do not have fellowship with Christians of other ethnic groups or countries and, in some cases, even Christians of other regions in China.

*'The persecution of North Korean Christians is increasing in both North Korea and China because both governments view Christianity as a channel for foreign activity which threatens the sovereignty of the state, so they are continuously developing more advanced ways to surveil, regulate and eliminate such activity.'*

Our partner believes it likely that more Christians will be arrested, imprisoned, displaced and martyred in North Korea in 2026. In China it is less likely that they will be executed but they could be sent back to North Korea where they could be killed.

## RELEASE INTERNATIONAL AND YOUR CHURCH



Singer Aimee has written and produced a CD to raise funds for persecuted believers

## WANT TO HEAR GOD'S POINT OF VIEW?

SONGWRITER and dedicated Release International volunteer Aimee Thompson has used her talents to write and produce a music CD to help persecuted believers.

The EP, called *God's POV* (God's Point of View), which features four original songs including the title track, is available on our website estore for a minimum price of £5.

Aimee, aged 27, who was inspired to connect with Release International after hearing our Engagement Manager for Northern Ireland speaking in her church, said: 'It's hard to hear stories of persecution and not do something about it. The work

*Release International does is amazing.'*

Aimee, who last year raised money to support persecuted Christians by running in the Belfast City marathon, will also be making the collection of music available to buy as an online download.

Paul Robinson, Release International's CEO, said, 'I am so grateful to Aimee for her ongoing support of Release International and the love, concern and dedication she shows for her persecuted brothers and sisters. This debut CD is so professional and such a pleasure to listen to; I recommend it wholeheartedly.'

Podcasts, page 5



Running order (top): Lynn (with her husband, Peter); (from left): Karen, Casey, George and Edward

## RACING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

A NUMBER of committed Release International volunteers have stepped out of their comfort zones and in some cases braved challenging conditions to show their love and support for persecuted Christians.

Among them were George and Edward who took on and completed the 200km Kerry Way Ultra endurance race in County Kerry, Ireland, in September.

'Thank God we both finished the race,' said Edward. 'Only 54 per cent of those who started finished so it really was a miracle we both finished considering we are pensioners.'

Lynn completed the sixth and last of the SuperHalves half-marathons in Valencia in October, while mother and daughter Karen and Casey joined forces for their race on the South Coast in the same month.

Congratulations and thanks to our amazing fundraisers, and to everyone who supported them. In total they raised more than £1,500!

- If you feel inspired to raise funds to help persecuted Christians but are not sure what to do, check out our **A-Z Fundraising Brochure**, which is available online at [releaseinternational.org/volunteers-resources-page](http://releaseinternational.org/volunteers-resources-page). It is packed full of creative fundraising ideas. We can support you by providing donation forms, copies of *Voice* magazines, bookmarks, film clips, digital images and information for your online fundraising page.



# LIGHT

IN THE DARKEST PLACES.

## REACHING THE HEIGHTS TO HELP THOSE IN THE DEPTHS

PAUL ROBINSON WILL BE CARRYING A LARGE WOODEN CROSS TO THE TOP OF ENGLAND'S HIGHEST PEAK AS PART OF A CAMPAIGN TO HIGHLIGHT THE PLIGHT OF SUFFERING BELIEVERS

INSPIRED by the faith and courage of our persecuted brothers and sisters we are adopting a special ministry theme to guide our events and activities throughout 2026: 'Light in the Darkest Places'.

Countless Christians across the world are living out their faith in places of danger and hostility. Some are forced to worship in secret, while many others face suffering, hardship and loss. However, in that darkness, they continue to live for Jesus. They show his compassion, they forgive and they keep sharing the good news. They are Christ's light in the darkest places.

Beginning with our contribution to the programme at the new Rising Lights conference in Torquay in April, our exhibition stands at Christian conferences and festivals will focus on these compelling stories. And later in the year our International Day of

Prayer for the persecuted church (IDOP) events and materials will also pick up the theme.

As part of this year's activities, our CEO, Paul Robinson, will be taking part in a special Light Walk Challenge. Setting out at 1am on Sunday, June 14, Paul will carry a large wooden cross to the top of England's highest peak, Scafell Pike. Pausing to pray along the route, he will identify with many persecuted Christians who can only meet together under the cover of darkness. Then, as dawn breaks, he will raise the cross on the summit – a powerful reminder of Christ's victory over the darkness, the hope that strengthens our persecuted brothers and sisters.

We will also be suggesting some creative ways in which your church can get involved. More details will be made available soon.



Inspired by a recent story in Voice magazine about how hearts made of felt are being given to persecuted believers for their encouragement, an anonymous supporter has used her skills to make some wonderful crochet crosses for the same purpose. An Indonesian Christian is pictured holding one of them



## 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

*Central England & Wales:*  
Allister on 07916 396178

*Scotland & North of England:*  
James on 07434 894016

# HOW DO WE RESPOND TO STORIES OF PERSECUTION?

**JACK NORMAN**  
REFLECTS ON THE  
IMPORTANCE OF  
MAINTAINING A  
SOFT HEART

In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul encourages us to *'rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep'* (12:15 ESV Anglicised).

The ESV begins this section with the sub-heading, 'Love in Action'. As he does in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is seeking to describe what love is, and what it should look like for the individual Christian and more widely among the community of believers.

What Paul is describing is what he might have termed 'genuine' love; love that is proved by its deeds.

We know that when a family member rejoices, we rejoice with them, and that we often weep with them when they suffer. These are natural reactions. Recently I celebrated my daughter's 30th birthday, while at the same time weeping for and with friends and family who are suffering ill-health and loss.

Paul is saying that authentic Christianity should result in the same response of fellowship and empathy within the family of faith.

I recall the time in 2007 when I was seeking God for direction in my life and I heard the story of a woman named Hanatu in Nigeria. I wept as I heard how members of her family were forced into their home and then burnt to death. This was the trigger for me to begin volunteering, and later working, for

Release International. The emotion I had felt was deepened seven years later when I had the chance to visit Nigeria. In one village, which had just been attacked, I spoke to Samuel, whose eight family members had also been burned to death. After hearing his story I had to find a quiet corner for a few moments where I simply wept and cried out to God for my brother.

However, because of the work we do in a ministry such as this, where stories of intense suffering are not uncommon, there are times when accounts such as these can become just another story. Yes, we pray for those involved but sometimes we are not as moved as we ought to be.

Recently we heard of the release from prison in Pakistan of Christian Zafar Bhatti, who had spent many years behind bars as a result of false blasphemy allegations. I gave thanks for his release, but, as I shared this with a friend at church, I was challenged about my own initial response. As I spoke, he just bowed his head, began crying, and told me he had been praying every day for Zafar. They were tears of rejoicing.

Sadly we heard a day later that Zafar had died of a heart attack. In that short time between his release and his death, God challenged me always to pray that my heart would remain soft when hearing stories of Christian brothers and sisters suffering persecution.

After the 2014 trip to Nigeria I remember thinking that the people I met were not just statistics, but individual family members with whom I should rejoice when they rejoiced, and weep when they wept. It's a lesson I need to remind myself of daily.

**“ I HAD TO FIND A QUIET CORNER WHERE I SIMPLY WEPT ”**



## INSPIRING FAITH

**'Jesus said, "Teach all nations". He never said that we need governmental permission to evangelise. Faithfulness to God and the Great Commission compels us to reach beyond borders to people in restricted nations.'**

**Pastor Richard Wurmbrand** 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.



# SIMPLE WAY TO SHOW HOW MUCH YOU CARE

Your regular support enables our partners to provide prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in around 30 countries.

Regular gifts such as through Direct Debits mean it is so much easier for us and our partners to plan that support, whether it's practical help such as providing food or shelter for Christians forced to flee, help for the families of those who have been

imprisoned for their faith and so are unable to provide for their spouse and children, or counselling for those who have suffered horrific trauma as a result of losing loved ones to violence.

Knowing that the funds are available to meet the needs of their persecuted brothers and sisters is also one less consideration for our partners at a time when they themselves can be

challenged by the demands of their ministry.

*'Thank you to everyone who gives to help our persecuted family,' said Paul Robinson, Release International chief executive. 'Regular giving particularly is very much appreciated. The more we know how much will be available the more we know how much we have to fund the needs of our persecuted brothers and sisters.'*

- Use the tear-off section of the letter or the Connect and Support card to set up your Direct Debit. Please make sure you include your name and address on the 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.

*giftaid it*

In order to Gift Aid your donation you must tick a box below. I want to Gift Aid my donation:

today  today, and any donations I make in the future or have made in the past 4 years.

I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax then the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations to that tax year is to my responsibility to declare. Please notify us if you want to cancel this declaration. • change your name or home address • no longer pay income tax on your income and/or capital gains. If you pay Income Tax at the higher or additional rate and want to receive the additional tax relief due to you, you must include all your Gift Aid donations on your Self Assessment tax return or ask HM Revenue and Customs to advise you on code.

Name

Date

**Yes, I want to partner with Release International**

**Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to make gifts by Direct Debit**

Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit Instructions for some types of account. PLEASE COMPLETE YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS ON THE REVERSE PAGE. THIS FORM CANNOT BE PROCESSED WITHOUT THEM.

Please pay Release International Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Release International and, if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank/Building Society.

Amount: £   Monthly  Quarterly  Annually

Make each payment on the  1st or  15th of the month, beginning on

These gifts are to be used wherever they are most needed.

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Account number  Sort code

Name of your Bank/Building Society

Date  Signed

I confirm that I am the account holder and am the only person required to authorise this Direct Debit.

Thank you!

The Direct Debit Guarantee • This Guarantee is offered by all banks and building societies that accept instructions to pay Direct Debits. • If there are any changes to the amount, date or frequency of your Direct Debit, Release International will notify you 3 working days in advance of your account being debited or as otherwise agreed. • If you request Release International to collect a payment, you are entitled to a full and immediate refund of the amount paid from your Bank or Building Society, if you receive a refund you are not entitled to, you must pay it back when Release International asks you to. • You can cancel a Direct Debit at any time by simply contacting your Bank or Building Society. Written confirmation may be required. Please also notify Release International.

Please return to Release in the Freepost envelope provided.  
Or to **FREEPOST RELEASE INTERNATIONAL**

www.releaseinternational.org 01689 823491 Charity Reg No 280577 (Scotland: SC040456)

R120

A DIRECT DEBIT IS SIMPLE TO SET UP

Use the tear-off section of the letter or the Connect and Support card to set up your Direct Debit. Please make sure you include your name and address on the card.

# 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@releaseinternational.org](mailto:info@releaseinternational.org) or use the enclosed response card.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians



MARCH 2026

IRAN

**SUNDAY 1:** Pray for our partner network of house churches and especially home group leaders in Iran, who are ministering under the ever-present threat of arrest.

**MONDAY 2:** Pray for our partners who are running fellowships of Iranian Christians in Turkey. Believers are coming under increasing pressure from the Government and immigration authorities. Pray for 'A' as she ministers to young Iranians in Turkey through worship music.

**TUESDAY 3:** Pray for God's guidance for young Iranian Christians in Turkey who want to apply to university. As well as being non-Turks and non-Muslims they come from families with few resources and indeterminate residency status so their applications can face considerable hurdles and discrimination.

**WEDNESDAY 4:** Pray that, as the number of Christians being arrested in Iran continues to grow dramatically, God would grant His children grace and strength to persevere. May their lawyers have wisdom and courage as they represent them.

**THURSDAY 5:** Remember Joseph Shahbazian and the many other Iranian Christians being held in Evin

and other prisons. Pray for their witness to fellow inmates, guards and court officials and that they would be treated with compassion.

**FRIDAY 6:** Give thanks for our partners' online resources, which enable Iranians, both inside and outside the country, to share and hear the gospel and support each other through prayer and discipleship despite the restrictions and surveillance of the Iranian regime.

**SATURDAY 7:** Many Iranians will travel to see relatives and friends for Nowruz, the Persian new year holiday and festival in late March. Pray for wisdom and protection for believers who take this opportunity to share the gospel with others.

EGYPT

**SUNDAY 8:** Pray that those coming to faith from a Muslim background in Egypt will have the strength to resist the pressure and opposition which inevitably come from their families.

**MONDAY 9:** Thank God for the way our partners are able to stand with those coming to faith from a Muslim background. Many need practical help as well as discipleship as they have lost their families, homes and jobs as a result of their conversion to Christ.

**TUESDAY 10:** Thank God for the practical help Release International partners are

able to give to impoverished Christians in parts of rural Egypt. One partner provides roofs for homes for families living in the hot and dry mountainous regions.

**WEDNESDAY 11:** Christian women in Egypt can face immense pressure, especially in poor, rural areas. Pray that our partners will be able to help them to stay strong in their faith and care for their families.

**THURSDAY 12:** Thank God that one of our partners was able to hold its first women's conference in the summer. The attendees included women and girls of all ages. Many were deeply impacted by the biblical teaching and refreshed by the times of fellowship.

**FRIDAY 13:** Ask God to bless a new sewing workshop recently started by one of our partners, which will help women in a remote village in Upper Egypt. Pray that it will help to provide them with a good source of income.

**SATURDAY 14:** Thank God that many Sudanese refugees in Egypt are being reached by our partners and are coming to faith in Christ. Pray that our partners will have the resources to disciple these new believers.

TANZANIA

**SUNDAY 15:** Praise God that there is still religious freedom in Tanzania, which is largely upheld by the Government. However,

persecution of Christians is becoming more frequent in Muslim-majority regions.

**MONDAY 16:** Please pray for Agatha, who has come to faith from a Muslim background and is experiencing persecution. Pray for her healing and for her health generally, for the construction of her house by our partner and for her spiritual walk with the Lord.

**TUESDAY 17:** Pray for our partner organisation as it trains, equips and sends pastors and evangelists into church-planting roles among hard-to-reach and often hostile communities.

**WEDNESDAY 18:** Pray that staff at a Christian school in northeast Tanzania will continue to teach the gospel (as they are legally allowed to do) despite pressure from local Islamic leaders. Pray for the growing number of students who have accepted Christ but are fearful of professing Him openly.

**THURSDAY 19:** Pray for Jacqueline, who is a single mother and was dismissed from her job because of her faith. Pray that her business selling second-hand clothes will generate enough income to support her and her two children, and that she would continue to grow in her faith.

**FRIDAY 20:** Praise God for those who are turning to Christ and for the growing number of visible and underground churches. Pray that God would continue



Rachel in Indonesia accepts she may experience persecution

to grow his church in the unreached parts of Tanzania.

**SATURDAY 21:** Pray for God's blessing on Asha, who has suffered for her faith, and for her family. Ask God to prosper her business selling petrol.

INDONESIA

**SUNDAY 22:** Owing to concerns about safety, churches across the Indonesian islands run by our partner deliberately have small congregations. Pray for wisdom for the leaders and safety for the members as they meet in often hostile environments.

**WEDNESDAY 25:** 'Leah' and her brother 'John' were rejected by their mother, who was angry at their conversion to Christ. Pray that they would remain strong in their faith.

**THURSDAY 26:** Pray for safety for our partner, 'Syarif', a former imam, who has led many to Christ and faces constant danger from local communities opposed to the gospel.

**FRIDAY 27:** Release International's partner trains young believers to share the gospel in their communities. Pray that God would protect them as they return to what are sometimes isolated locations.

**SATURDAY 28:** 'Rachel', who has been trained by our partner and who has already baptised five new believers on one island, accepts that persecution may come. Pray that, should this happen, she will remain strong in Christ.

MALAYSIA

**SUNDAY 29:** Please pray for Malay followers of Jesus, most of whom are secret believers. As a result of more restrictive laws they must attend their regional mosques or face severe consequences.

**MONDAY 30:** Ask God to bless new converts to Christianity



Malay followers of Jesus face harsh consequences if they do not attend mosque

from Muslim backgrounds with encouragement, endurance and strong faith despite often being solitary believers.

**TUESDAY 31:** Please pray for two mission workers who have been faithfully ministering to Malays for many years but now find themselves without income and living far from home. May they know God's provision and direction for their lives.

*Lord Jesus  
As we approach Easter help me to be mindful of my persecuted brothers and sisters for whom the celebration of Holy Week could spark hostility from those opposed to the gospel.  
Grant them wisdom in how they prepare to celebrate Your death and resurrection and help me also to focus on what is truly important, and to bear witness in my community to Easter's true significance.  
Amen*

Sources: Release International associate ministries, partners and contacts. Names in quotation marks 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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PRAYERSHIELD



Pastor Anojan is determined to see the church grow despite persecution

JANUARY 2026

*Heavenly Father,  
Thank You for the gift of a new year. I ask that You would strengthen my persecuted brothers and sisters in their determination to follow You faithfully no matter what the next 12 months holds for them.*

*Empower them daily to contribute to their communities with such love and integrity '... that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive...' (Titus 1:10)*

*Help me also to serve others with the same attitude in this country where I have freedom to worship and pray with fellow believers.*

*In Jesus's precious name I pray.  
Amen*

SRI LANKA

**THURSDAY 1:** Let's start the new year by praising the Lord for Release International partners who are providing training and support to many persecuted pastors across Sri Lanka.

**FRIDAY 2:** Pastor Anojan planted a church in a majority Hindu area and has faced many challenges: the fellowship's building has been looted and damaged, church equipment has been stolen and members have been threatened. Despite this, Anojan is determined to see the church grow.

**SATURDAY 3:** After Pastor Jonathan and his wife, Meesa, attended a training session run by our partner, he said: *'This training programme has helped me in a tremendous way. I*

*shared what I learnt with my friends and church members.'*

**SUNDAY 4:** Pray for Pastor 'Akashan', who leads a local congregation and has trained and nurtured many church workers. His church building has been set on fire seven times and each time he has worked on his own to repair it. Despite the dangers he continues his ministry.

**MONDAY 5:** In the north of Sri Lanka there has been an increase in the activity and influence of Hindu extremist groups, seeking to oppose and restrict Christians. Pray that the love of Christ would prevail.



## PRAYERSHIELD

**TUESDAY 6:** Pray for believers in Sri Lanka such as 'Roshin', who was attacked and threatened with his life after sharing the Christian message at a gospel rally.

**WEDNESDAY 7:** Ask the Lord to give Christians in Sri Lanka wisdom to know how to respond to the persecution, opposition and restrictions they face.

## UKRAINE

**THURSDAY 8:** The war in Ukraine continues to have an impact on the church in the occupied territories, with evangelical believers a particular target for oppression by Russian forces. Pray that the conflict will end soon.

**FRIDAY 9:** Ask God to comfort Christians grieving the loss of loved ones and to bring physical and emotional healing to victims of the war. Pray particularly for our partner's annual trauma-healing retreats in Poland which provide respite for front-line church workers.

**SATURDAY 10:** Many evangelicals have been arrested and tortured by Russian forces. Although we cannot reveal their names publicly, please pray that God would comfort and strengthen His people and keep them from despair.

**SUNDAY 11:** Pray for all the Ukrainian pastors, including military chaplains, who are ministering to those most affected by the conflict. Pray for strength, wisdom and integrity for their ministries, and for receptive hearts in those to whom they share the gospel.



Rev Faiz Jirjees says that Christians in Iraq are treated as the lowest of the low

**MONDAY 12:** Pray that churches and Christian organisations, including our partners, would provide places of healing, encouragement and transformation for all those affected by the war.

**TUESDAY 13:** Increasing drone, bomb and missile attacks have led to the destruction of ever more homes, schools, churches and clinics. As the cold winter continues, pray for all those who now have nowhere to live. Pray too God's blessing on the churches that are providing shelter and comfort for the homeless.

**WEDNESDAY 14:** Pray that Christians in the Mariupol and Melitopol areas, where churches have been targeted by the Russians, would continue to enjoy strong fellowship.

## IRAQ

**THURSDAY 15:** Pray for Rev Canon Faiz Jirjees and his assistant, Sinan, at St George's

Church in Baghdad, the sole Anglican church in Iraq. Their ministry is exhausting, so pray that God will give them good health and continued energy and inspiration. Pray too for God's protection on the church and its school and health clinic.

**FRIDAY 16:** Pray for ordinary Iraqi Christians, who are often at the bottom of the social order; discriminated against at school, in business or employment, and by the authorities. Many want to leave the country but have nowhere to go. Rev Faiz says: 'Christians have no jobs, no security, no future for their children and most cannot afford to leave.'

**SATURDAY 17:** Pray for peace and stable governance for Iraq, which would benefit the minority Christian population. Regional conflicts often spill over into Iraq, exacerbating cycles of Shia-Sunni violence there, which in turn affects Christians and other minorities.

## PRAYERSHIELD

**SUNDAY 18:** Give thanks that the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region remains a rare beacon of religious freedom and tolerance for the Middle East, where Christians are free to live and practise their faith. Pray that the new Kurdistan Regional Government can continue to provide peace and stability for all religious and ethnic minorities.

**MONDAY 19:** Pray for Christian internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in camps in Kurdistan and across northern Iraq who fled ISIS or the Syrian war a decade ago. Many were dependent upon US-funded aid which was cut abruptly and now have nothing and nowhere else to go. Pray too for those trying to help them, often volunteers with limited resources.

**TUESDAY 20:** Pray for our partner in Kurdistan and its Hope for All Nations Church in Erbil as well as its growing Arab, Kurdish and Farsi ministries. Pray that those who have fled persecution in other parts of Iraq and neighbouring countries would find peace and hope through the ministries.

**WEDNESDAY 21:** Pray for comfort and healing for 'Jameela', a Syrian war widow who fled to Kurdistan and is now undergoing treatment for cancer.

## ARMENIA

**THURSDAY 22:** Praise God for Armenia's Christian heritage. Despite being for much of its history a part of empires opposed to Christianity, most

recently the Soviet Union, Armenians are proud of being the first country officially to declare itself a Christian nation.

**FRIDAY 23:** Pray for a change of heart in the Turkish Government, which has expressed a desire to link all regions populated by Turkic people from Turkey through Central Asia to Western China. The small Christian nation of Armenia sits in the middle of these predominantly Islamic countries.

**SATURDAY 24:** Pray for resources, protection and wisdom for the Armenian evangelical churches and ministries that Release International has visited, which are reaching out with the gospel to nominal Armenian Christians as well as those coming from neighbouring countries such as Iran.

**SUNDAY 25:** Pray for a spiritual revival so that, even if Armenia is over-run by a neighbouring state, the church would survive.

**MONDAY 26:** Pray for Armenian Christians who were displaced from the Nagorno Karabakh region when it was seized by Azerbaijan. Many are still without work and struggling to rebuild their lives.

**TUESDAY 27:** Thank God for ministries in Armenia seeking to help those displaced from Nagorno Karabakh. Through them many are being retrained with the relevant skills to get them back into work to support their families.

**WEDNESDAY 28:** Pray for Armenia's ongoing relations

with Iran, which is also not keen on being surrounded by Turkic nations that can cut off its trade routes.

## PAKISTAN

**THURSDAY 29:** Pray for Strength to Stand (S2S) groups, which work to increase resilience and protection for some of the most persecuted, deprived and vulnerable Christian women in Pakistan. One participant, Shimon, said: *'I feel a new strength within me – a strength that comes from God's Word and the encouragement I receive from my group family.'*

**FRIDAY 30:** Thank God that, although Christian women can be discriminated against and are unable to find work, many have been able to start small businesses with loans from their S2S groups.

**SATURDAY 31:** Pray for God's comfort and strength for Nawab Bibi, whose husband, Zafar Bhatti (pictured), died



shortly after being released from prison in October. He had been behind bars since 2012, having been falsely accused of blasphemy. Nawab is supported by a Release International partner.

**'What started as a dream has now become a reality ... By the grace of God, my business has flourished far beyond what I imagined.'**  
*Sahar (S2S member)*

## PRAYERSHIELD

## FEBRUARY 2026 SOMALIA

**SUNDAY 1:** Pray for Somali Christians who have fled to Nairobi, Kenya. Many struggle to be accepted in local churches because of their ethnicity. Pray that there would be less suspicion and greater acceptance within Kenyan churches.

**MONDAY 2:** Pray for boldness, fruitfulness and safety for Somali Christians who are being trained by Release International's partners to reach out with the gospel to fellow Somalis. Evangelism in Somali communities, whether in northern Kenya or Somalia itself, is highly dangerous.

**TUESDAY 3:** Pray for Operation Joshua, which helps Somalis who have fled persecution to build new micro-businesses. Pray for the success of these projects and that the Joshua team would be able to identify those most in need of help.

**WEDNESDAY 4:** Pray for Operation Joshua's media projects, which aim to increase the reach and effectiveness of all its work – from trauma response to Bible study materials.

**THURSDAY 5:** Pray for the underground church in Somalia. There are no church buildings in the country and evangelism is illegal. Pray that the church would remain faithful and grow in numbers as Christians meet in secret.

**FRIDAY 6:** Pray that believers in Somalia would be blessed with access to Bibles, which



A Burkinabe pastor prays with his wife and child

are currently prohibited. Pray that physical copies would not be found by those opposed to the gospel and that efforts to increase digital access would be both safe and successful.

**SATURDAY 7:** Pray for the terrorist group al-Shabaab, which pursues and kills Christians within Somali. May God bring many of its members to Christ.

## BURKINA FASO

**SUNDAY 8:** Pray that God would restore peace, security and stability in Burkina Faso and that those in positions of power, leadership and influence would act with godly integrity to protect all citizens.

**MONDAY 9:** Pray for the protection of displaced Christians especially in areas where poverty is rife and newcomers can be seen as a burden.

**TUESDAY 10:** Pray for the

displaced Christian children who are receiving education provided by our partner. Pray that they would be able to thrive despite the trauma they may have experienced and the many challenges they face.

**WEDNESDAY 11:** Pray for emotional healing for believers who have lost loved ones, land or possessions due to the Islamist violence and the resulting mass displacement of Christians.

**THURSDAY 12:** Pray that Christians would be able to stand firm in their faith despite the challenges they have faced and be able to share God's love with others.

**FRIDAY 13:** Pray for pastors who minister to and lead displaced Christians, often in simple tent churches within IDP camps. Pray for God's blessing on them so that they can inspire and encourage others and lead by example.

**SATURDAY 14:** Pray for the safety – and daily decision-

## PRAYERSHIELD

making – of our partner's local team, who are frequently travelling along dangerous roads in order to take support to persecuted believers.

## INDIA

**SUNDAY 15:** Pray for Christian families now facing 'social boycotts' in the Saura hills of Odisha, eastern India, who are unable to buy or sell produce or access communal water sources simply because of their faith.

**MONDAY 16:** Pray for encouragement for Christian children, especially in rural areas such as the Saura hills of Odisha, who are bullied and rejected because they follow Christ. Pray that their teachers would model better behaviour and treat all their students fairly.

**TUESDAY 17:** Pray for Rajendra, who remains in jail in Rajasthan on false charges of beating his mother (who in reality was attacked by a Hindu mob) and forcible conversion. Pray that he would have courage and that God would comfort his wife and family; and that justice would prevail.

**WEDNESDAY 18:** Pray for mental and physical healing for all those who were attacked for their faith in India last year. Ask God to ease their fears as they hand over their trauma and anger to Him.

**THURSDAY 19:** Pray for success for the lawyers representing and advising

Indian Christians who have been accused, charged or jailed under the ever-tightening anti-conversion laws in various states. Pray that spurious charges would be dropped and that the freedoms enshrined in India's constitution would prevail over these harsh local laws.

**FRIDAY 20:** Give thanks for believers who have been able to gather and worship again in the troubled northeastern state of Manipur, which was racked by communal violence in June 2023. However, church buildings remain destroyed and thousands of Christians are still displaced.

**SATURDAY 21:** Pray for the Bible Society of India, and all those involved in translating, printing and distributing God's word in numerous languages across India. As hatred and persecution of Christians increases many believers are unable to meet to worship or study the Bible together, so being able to read it in their own homes is critical. Pray that the Scriptures would strengthen all who read them.

**TUESDAY 22:** Pray for healing, comfort and strength for Mark Lipdo, who leads our partner organisation, Stefanos Foundation, and for his wife, Peace. Despite having significant health issues, they continue to serve in ministry.

**WEDNESDAY 23:** Pray for our partner, Rev Mark Mukan, and his growing role within

the Anglican Church of Nigeria and the multi-denominational Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Pray that he can make useful contacts and partnerships so that more Nigerian churches are encouraged to provide support for their persecuted brothers and sisters.

**TUESDAY 24:** Pray for Asabe, who lost her husband and two sons and suffered severe burns in a brutal Islamist attack on their village in 2025. Her young daughter and mother-in-law were also injured in the raid on Zike village on Palm Sunday.

**WEDNESDAY 25:** Pray for strength, peace and grace for our partners' teams, who regularly witness the aftermath of bloody attacks on Christian communities.

**THURSDAY 26:** Pray that those inhabitants of Zike village who did not lose family members in the Palm Sunday attack but who remain traumatised by what happened would not suffer 'survivor's guilt' but would receive the help they need.

**FRIDAY 27:** Pray that God would stir the hearts of Nigeria's leaders to act justly and decisively against the extremist violence plaguing their country.

**SATURDAY 28:** Thank God that He is drawing persecutors of the church in Nigeria to Himself. Ask Him to protect all those who are sharing the gospel with militants often in highly dangerous situations.