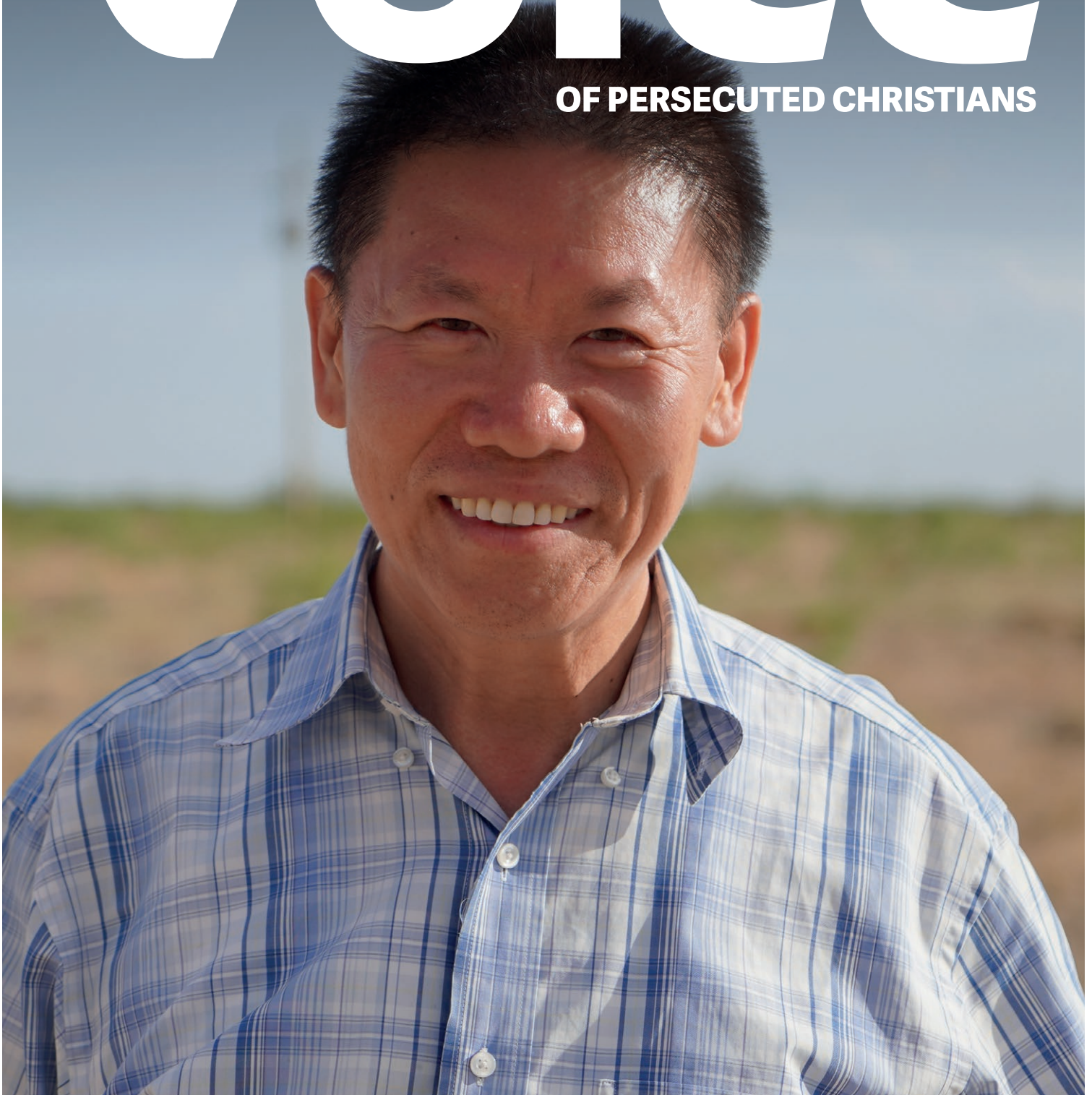


voice

OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS



**HELPING
OPPRESSED
CHRISTIANS**

Chinese church crackdown
Betrayed by their own mother
Hope and healing in Iraq
Supporting Egyptian believers

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

WELCOME

PAUL ROBINSON, CEO



AS WE DRAW NEAR TO CELEBRATING EASTER, THE CROSS BECOMES EVER MORE A FOCUS FOR OUR FAITH.

Every time we see a cross (a brutal form of execution) on a church wall or around someone's neck we should be reminded that following God carries a cost, one that He paid for us but also one that He calls us to carry.

In our western world it is tempting to disassociate or ignore Christ's command to 'take up your cross and follow Me', just as it is easy to walk past the cross on the side of a building without a second thought for what it represents.

Ironically, however, it seems that the atheist Government in China, and no doubt elsewhere, takes crosses on church buildings far more seriously than we do; hence why it is actively pulling them down (see feature, page 12). They know what this symbol represents – even though they may not believe in God. They know its power: a symbol that denotes a higher authority than the state. However, that very act of demolishing churches and pulling down crosses only causes the population to ask: 'What is it about this symbol that so worries the Government that it has to be destroyed?'

And so in this attempt to destroy the truth (just as happened 2,000 years ago at Calvary) history is repeating itself. The Chinese Government is unknowingly fulfilling the will of God in its actions just as the religious leaders were doing by seeking to have Christ crucified.

So on Good Friday, as you contemplate Christ's sacrifice for you, take a moment to think about the power of the cross: not just to bring salvation to individual sinners for the past two millennia but to continue to challenge all those authorities that would seek to deny Christ today.

PEAK PERFORMERS

This June, as part of our special ministry theme in 2026 – Light in the Darkest Places – I and a team of about 20 Release International supporters will be carrying a large wooden cross to the summit of Scafell Pike. Having trekked up the peak during the night, we will plant the cross at the top to welcome in the dawn's light – a powerful reminder of Christ's victory over the darkness.

Please do support us in prayer, and through sponsorship if you are inclined, as we highlight the courage of persecuted believers who display the light of Christ in the darkest of circumstances. See page 20 for details.

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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

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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FAITH UNDER FIRE



Rev Bulus Madaki

Mission family members killed in ambush

A three-month-old baby girl has been left without her mother, father and grandfather after militant Fulani herdsman ambushed the Christian family as they travelled to a mission station in Nigeria's Plateau state earlier this year.

The baby, who was attacked with a machete, was left to die but survived despite a severe head injury.

The Evangelical Missionary Society (EMS) of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) said in a statement that Rev Bulus Madaki, an EMS worker, his daughter and son-in-law were attacked on the road to a village in Barkin Ladi on January 16.

'In Nigeria, the gospel is often preached at the cost of blood and tears, the blood and tears of missionaries who choose to follow Christ no matter the price,' EMS leaders stated.

'Mission in Nigeria is growing, but the danger that comes with it is both real, brutal and enduring. In spite of this attack, it is sure evidence that we are winning and souls are being won to Christ through a tumultuous period.'

ECWA members told Christian Daily International-Morning Star News that persecution of Christians would continue to serve as a catalyst for the spread of the gospel in Nigeria.

(Source: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News)



An injured Pastor Naik is paraded through the streets

Police stand aside as Indian pastor beaten

A nationalist mob in India subjected a pastor to dehumanising brutality, damaging his hearing and trying to force him to worship a Hindu deity, sources said.

Villagers led by 'cow vigilantes' placed a garland of footwear around Pastor Bipin Bihari Naik's neck (pictured), and made him walk on thorns as they paraded him through Parjang village in Dhenkanal, Odisha state.

Along with tying him up at a Hindu temple and trying to force him to chant Hindu slogans, they attempted to make him drink water mixed with cow dung, the sources said.

Pastor Naik, aged 35, who had been dragged out of his house and beaten, suffered an injury that has affected his hearing in one ear. He said surviving the ordeal was a miracle. *'When ... police showed no intention of rescuing me, I surrendered my spirit to Jesus, knowing they would kill me,'* he told Morning Star News (MSN).

His wife, Bandana, who along with their two daughters had witnessed the attack, had rushed to the police station to get help but instead officers had insisted she first provide a written report of the assault; then they said they were unable to help because their vehicle was out on patrol.

Two policemen who later went to find Naik returned, saying that he was nowhere to be found. However, Naik said he saw them approaching but then turning around and leaving.

The assailants had tried to get him to bow to the statue of a Hindu god. They demanded he chant the Hindu slogan, 'Jai Shri Ram [Hail lord Ram],' but the pastor said, 'Jai Yeshu [Hail Jesus],' and they hit him more, he said. The mob then made a garland out of slippers, put it around his neck and paraded him through the village barefoot, making him walk on thorny bush branches. They even passed the police station where Bandana was waiting anxiously.

It was more than two hours later that Bandana and the police found Naik. However, instead of rushing him to hospital, the officers threatened to file a case against him and put him in jail unless he stated that *'the mob misunderstood my activities and mistook me for a person carrying out illegal conversions in the village and thus attacked me,'* he said.

Naik was taken to hospital, said the source, but he and his family have moved to an undisclosed location more than 40 miles away since the attack in January.

Naik said both his daughters had been *'traumatised and could not sleep for four nights and did not eat food for three days'.*

- Also in Odisha in January three members of a Christian family were killed by tribal relatives, leaving three children, including a pre-teen and a teenager, orphaned and forcing them into hiding, sources said. It is understood that Jitendra Soren, aged 35, his wife Malati, 32, and their 15-year-old daughter, Sasmita, were killed by relatives who believed their conversion to Christianity had caused illness in the family.

(Source: Morning Star News)

**SIGN UP TO
RELEASE**



Listen to our latest podcasts



Follow Me and You'll Be Free

(Part 1) Tom Hardie talks to Release International's Indonesian partner, 'Sharif', about his inspiring faith journey from imprisoned Islamic radical to follower of Christ. Born into a family of imams and radicalised in the Muslim Brotherhood, Sharif never imagined he would meet Jesus in a solitary prison cell. In the first of this two part conversation, he shares how jihad, political activism and imprisonment led him to a series of mysterious encounters and a long, painful journey through the Koran that ended at the feet of Christ.

Singing for the Suffering Host Kenneth Harrod welcomes Aimee Thompson, a 26-year-old musician and student from Northern Ireland. Aimee 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. Aimee'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 her album 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 their hearts for testing times ahead. This gripping testimony reminds us that God's silence is never his absence.



Dai Zhichao

CHINESE HOUSE CHURCH TARGETED

Two leaders of a house church in Chengdu in southwest China were among those arrested earlier this year accused of 'inciting subversion of state power'.

At the time of writing elder Li Yingqiang and pastor Dai Zhichao (pictured) of the Early Rain Covenant Church, who were detained in the January crackdown, were being held in a detention centre, according to Release International's partner, ChinaAid.

Among the others detained was Li's wife, Zhang Xinyue, who was later released on bail pending trial.

ChinaAid has joined calls for the Chinese authorities to 'respect the constitutional right to freedom of religious belief, cease judicial persecution of peaceful believers, and immediately release all those whose freedoms are restricted'.

This latest raid marked another large-scale operation targeting the church. In December 2018 more than 100 Christians, including Wang Yi, the leader of the church, were taken into police custody.

Couple's message, page 12

Ugandan convert dies after knife attack by father

A Christian in Uganda reportedly died after being attacked by his Muslim father angry at his conversion, sources have said.

Hamba Juma, aged 33, is understood to have been killed with a long knife known locally as a *panga* by Hamba Ahammada. He leaves a wife, Nangobi Mariati, and four children ranging in age from 3 to 12 years.

Mariati said that her father-in-law attacked her husband after they had eaten dinner together.

'After supper, my father-in-law requested the panga from our son, aged 12, without us

knowing,' Mariati said. 'Shortly afterward he called my husband, "Juma, Juma, Juma – come, come, come".'

Hamba Juma rushed over, thinking his father had a problem, but instead Ahammada picked up the *panga* and attacked him.

Mariati said: *'It seems that it was a planned move, because immediately people tried to look for him and they couldn't [find] him.'*

'My husband screamed for help, we tried to make it to the hospital, but there he was pronounced dead.'

Mariati said her husband was killed because he had converted from Islam.

(Source: Morning Star News)

ACTION TO TACKLE PAKISTAN CHILD MARRIAGE

In a landmark move welcomed by Christian rights advocates, the governor of Pakistan's Punjab province has signed into law an ordinance raising the minimum legal age of marriage to 18 and making child marriage a non-bailable offence punishable by up to seven years in prison.

Saleem Haider Khan signed the Punjab Child Marriage Restraint Ordinance 2026 into effect under Article 128(1) of the Constitution in February, as the provincial assembly was not in session. The ordinance took immediate effect across the country's most populous province, home to more than 120 million people, including a significant Christian minority.

Christian leaders welcomed the move, describing it as a long-overdue reform and urged lawmakers to convert it into permanent legislation when the assembly reconvenes. Ordinances put forward by a governor lapse unless approved by the legislature within a constitutionally defined period.

The ordinance replaces provisions of the nearly century-old Punjab Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, under which the legal marriage age was 18 for men and 16 for women. The new measure sets 18 as the minimum age for both sexes.

Under the revised legal framework, anyone who contracts, facilitates or promotes a child marriage faces stringent penalties – up to seven years' imprisonment and fines of up to 1 million rupees (£2,600).

Adults who marry a child face imprisonment of no less than two years and up to three years, along with fines of up to 500,000 rupees.

(Source: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News)

A close-up, profile view of a man with a dark beard and hair, wearing a blue jacket, playing an acoustic guitar. The background is bright and out of focus, suggesting an outdoor setting. The text is overlaid on the image.

**HELPING OPPRESSED
CHRISTIANS**

Ber's home and
music studio were
targeted after a story
appeared in the news

SPIES, ANGRY MOBS AND TREACHEROUS PARENTS

ON A RECENT TRIP TO
INDONESIA **TOM HARDIE**
MET YOUNG BELIEVERS
FACING OPPOSITION
FROM VARIOUS QUARTERS
AS THEY BRAVELY SHARE
THE GOSPEL

For 'Ber'*, his journey to faith began with a visit from his aunt, a Christian, during which she took hold of a cigarette he was smoking and pressed the burning end against his leg!

As Ber cried out in pain, she scolded him: *'This is just a small fire. Imagine if you die and go to Hell. It's really, really hot! Think about it! Think about your life!'*

Angry at her unusual – and painful – method of evangelism, Ber nevertheless took her words to heart and began to recall the times he had gone to church as a child.

'I had peace when I remembered Jesus,' said Ber, who had grown up attending church and the mosque as his mother was a Christian and his father a Muslim.

In fact peace was something he had not known for a number of years. As a child he had struggled to follow society's rules and as a teenager had turned to drugs.

Then one day his world fell apart as a violent dispute arose with a local family. There was a fight during which his neighbour drew a knife on Ber.

'He tried to kill me but I got hold of the weapon and then almost blinded him.'

Eventually, however, Ber was overpowered. *'I was scared they would either kill me or take me to the police but I managed to escape,'* he said.

It was while he was in hiding that his aunt made her memorable visit, followed a short while later by his mother, who invited him to what she said was a 'retreat' but which later turned out to be a Bible school!

'She lied to me,' he said with a wry smile, *'but when I got there, as I had no money to return home, I decided to stay and follow the course and attend the lectures.'*

During the course Ber *'had a lot of experiences with God. At that point I really became a Christian.'*

One of the visiting speakers was the head of a Release International European associate ministry, who talked about ministering in Syria and

showed a video of people turning to Christ and being baptised.

'He baptised almost 300 people from a Muslim background, which at first I thought was impossible, but when I read of similar things in the New Testament I knew that I had to go to Muslim people as well.'

Ber spent a total of three years at the school before being commissioned to be an evangelist in another part of Indonesia.

PERSECUTION FOLLOWS

However, for the first two years he experienced only disappointment as, one by one, people rejected his message.

'I was frustrated and said to God: "Why is there no fruit?"' However, despite his disappointment and lack of response from those he talked to, Ber persevered.

'In the third year I met a girl who wanted to talk about King David from the Old Testament. So we started studying the Psalms together before progressing to Jesus. She then invited a friend to join us and then others and eventually there were ten people. Out of those, six became believers.'

'So after three years there was fruit. And from these six, there are now 70 to 80 second and third-generation believers.'

However, along with the fruit, Ber, who made a living by teaching music, began to experience persecution. The mother of one of those who had come to faith – 'John'* (see story on page 8) – informed on Ber, not only to the authorities but also to the media.

'She reported me to the police but I had been invited to go and stay with my mentor at that time, so was not at home.'

'Before I got to him, though, I had a call from a friend telling me not to return home because a large group of people had turned up at my house, wanting to kill me.'

A story had appeared in the news, saying that he was involved in 'Christianising' the local population.

'Journalists had put my face all over social media so I could not return.'

The mob that went to his home took all his books, including his Bible, and



**PERSECUTION
IS A PRIVILEGE
FROM HEAVEN'**

burned them before going on to his music studio nearby where they either destroyed or stole the instruments.

THE INFILTRATORS

Needless to say, Ber and his family were unable to return home and had to move to a new location.

They have continued to experience persecution on a number of occasions as more people have come into the church.

Sadly, as well as new believers, they have attracted others who have pretended to show an interest in Christianity simply to gain information about Ber's ministry.

'One couple even got baptised, then reported us to the police and the media as before. Police came to the hotel where we had a service and interrogated church members.'

He added: *'It's not illegal to convert in Indonesia but religion is stronger than the law.'*

During one Christmas celebration at a hotel, members of a Muslim youth organisation turned up and began taking photographs of participants.

'I asked one of them what they were doing there and told them to go away because we were holding a ceremony. We started having an argument and I took his phone. God gave me the courage to stand up to them and in the end they deleted the photos and video. I told them: "I won't let you go unless you delete the material!"'

The group went out of the building but Ber knew they would return so he finished the ceremony quickly and left the hotel.

On another occasion, during a church service, members of the fellowship prayed for the children of an Islamic leader.

'He saw us praying and almost attacked us during the service, saying, "If you don't leave this place I will hit you."'

Unsurprisingly Ber admitted to being *'a little scared of persecution. But it is a privilege from Heaven. I never feel angry towards those who have persecuted me. God gives me a big heart*

to face it and forgive the people.'

He added: *'The training [from Release International's Indonesian partner] helps young people to grow in their faith. Please pray that I am brave and can stay strong in what I'm doing.'*

BETRAYED BY THEIR OWN MOTHER

Reports of families rejecting or disowning members who turn to Christ are not uncommon and many cases have been reported by Release International.

However, the thought of a parent betraying their child to the police as well as the media appears particularly cruel and vindictive.

Sadly that is what happened to 'John'* and 'Leah*', siblings whose mother, angry at their conversion, informed on them to a journalist and the police authorities.

'I was born into Catholicism but when I was in high school my parents divorced and my mother converted and married a Muslim,' said John.

'I wanted to please my mother so I became a Muslim in 2012. However, I never worshipped as a Muslim and only went to the mosque four or five times a year.'

It was while he was working in a shop in another part of Indonesia that he had a visit from a man whom he later came to know as Ber (see main story, p6).

'He wore the same clothes as people from the place where I was from so I felt I was not alone; here was someone from my own ethnic background.'

'After a month he messaged me and invited me to meet him, so after work one day I went to see him at his home where some of his friends had gathered.'

The group invited him back again and eventually they began to talk about Jesus. In due course John started to study the Bible and eventually came to faith in Christ.

'I decided to be baptised after which we had a celebration at home where my mum and sister and friends were,' he said. John's sister had also become a Christian so the siblings were baptised at the same time.

At first all seemed well but after three months their mother, who now worked in Islamic development, appeared to reject her children's actions.

'She reported the baptism to a journalist before going to the police; baptism is not against the law but she said she did not now agree [with what we had done].'

'The journalist, who was a Muslim friend of my mother, posted to the internet that her son had converted. It was big news and many people read it. I was very angry; she had agreed [about the baptism] but had then denied me.'

At the same time John's mother reported Ber to the police because he had performed the baptisms.

'She was trying to get Ber into trouble but at the same time it obviously affected me. I met him and told him my mother had reported him to a journalist.'

In an effort to defuse the situation, John and his sister went to see the reporter, and asked him why he had covered the story. The man claimed that people had reported concerns about what they called 'Christianisation' taking place.

'I said there was no "Christianisation" and that it was simply a problem between a son and his mother.'

Worse was to follow. In the evening John received a phone call from the police, calling him in for questioning the next day.

'I went to the police station and faced a lot of questions. They interrogated me from 10am to 4pm and again the following day.'

'They asked me why I had learned about Jesus and I said I wanted to know more about Jesus so I talked to the people who knew more about Jesus, not to Muslim teachers, just like at school; if you want to know maths you go to the maths teacher!'

'Even though it's not illegal to be baptised, they thought it was spreading Christianity.'



John and his sister, Leah, minister in areas where Islamic radicals operate

John and his sister were then called in to see their mother's employer at the Islamic development office. Thankfully he accepted their account that it had been a family dispute and after that the online news of their baptisms began to fade.

However, some of John's friends had read the story and told him they no longer wanted to know him; as well as this he lost his job and had to move area.

John is not bitter. In fact he credits the training he has received from Release International's partner for helping him to forgive his mother.

'We have met since and she accepts my new faith,' he said, adding: 'I would say to those facing persecution that it is a mercy for you, because, [as a result] of that, people will hear the good news. So do not be afraid. The Holy Spirit is working in you.'

'STILL ANGRY'

John's sister, 'Leah', however, is less confident of their mother's willingness to accept her faith.

'My mother is still angry at me for becoming a Christian. She sees me as a [traitor], but I feel free and not angry. I know God is my Father, Jesus my Brother.'

Leah, who had experienced abuse from her stepfather, was attracted to follow Jesus because of His ability to mend broken hearts.

'My mother was angry I'd become a Christian and said I was not her daughter any more.'

'At the moment I don't have any communication with her. I feel safe and growing in my faith. I do not tell her where I am because she could come and do something bad. I know my mum; she can do anything.'

Leah finds comfort in Psalm 27:10 (*'Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.'*). At the same time she asks that Christians in the UK would pray for her parents to come to faith and that she and her brother would know God's protection because they minister in areas where Islamic radicals operate.

FROM POISONER TO PREACHER

Following an earthquake in 2018 a group of Christians took aid to a number of villages on one of the Indonesian islands that had been affected by the disaster.

Among those they met was a frightened woman called 'Denda' who, after a month of visits and discussions about Jesus and the forgiveness of sins with a Christian called 'Joyce', became a believer.

It was only five years later that she confessed to Joyce that she had tried to poison her when she first arrived because she had not liked her.

'She made coffee with [contaminated] water in it so I would die, even though I had come to help her,' said Joyce.

'I think the fact that I was not sick and returned a week later made her wonder what had happened and want to know more. Eventually she opened her heart and became a believer.'

Denda later shared her new-found faith with her parents and after six months they believed and were baptised. Four years after this she underwent training with our partner and then moved to another location where she began to share the gospel and see people respond.

The delight of seeing others coming to faith in Christ was not to last, however. One day her neighbours became suspicious and, managing to get hold of her mobile phone, discovered the photo of a Muslim being baptised. They then went to the police, who interrogated Denda a number of times. On the fourth occasion they arrested her in the police station.

Thankfully Denda was able to contact Joyce and tell her what had happened.

'Denda called me. She was crying. One police officer had threatened her about the photo.'

The man had taken a hot iron, grabbed her hand and threatened to burn her arm if she did not talk, but she refused to admit anything.

Frustrated that she would not confess but unwilling to go through with his threats the officer instead put her in the jail without food or water and with only insects for company.

SPECIAL GIFT

Denda remembers being so upset that she started shaking but her ordeal was to last only one night.

Joyce continued: *'God sent her a special gift. The head of the police there, who did not know what had happened to Denda, had a Christian background so the next day, when he looked into the jail and saw a woman in the cells, he told the officers to open it up so he could talk to her.'*

'He asked her what had happened and told her that, in future, if any police called her to the station, she wasn't to go.'

It was a traumatic experience for



Rachel lost family and friends after committing her life to Christ and being baptised

Denda but after being released she resolved that she would not stop sharing the gospel with others.

Two months later she went to visit a Muslim friend, a married woman, and began to tell her about her conversion and recent experience of being arrested.

Unfortunately the woman's husband overheard them while they were talking outside the house. He rushed out in the rain and warned Denda not to talk about Jesus to his wife, then he pushed her over and, while she lay on the ground, ripped off her veil. He then pulled out a knife and used it to cut up the veil.

'The next time you come to meet my wife I will be cutting you like the veil,' he said.

Denda stood up but he started pushing her again, this time towards a fast-flowing river that ran beside the property. Before she knew it she had lost her balance and was in the river, desperately trying to stop herself being dragged away by the current and drowned.

In desperation she reached out and

managed to grab hold of a tree root, which saved her life, and eventually she was able to climb to safety.

In that situation most people would have reported the incident to the police but, as Joyce says, even though it is not illegal to share one's faith in Indonesia, religion is *'bigger than the law'*, so making an official complaint of this sort would be of little use.

Despite the opposition, however, Denda has not been deterred from sharing the gospel; she even runs and pastors one of the groups of believers connected with our partner. These home churches – made up of about eight believers each – are kept deliberately small in number to avoid attention from the local communities although they join together for celebrations when safe to do so.



**THE NEXT TIME YOU
COME TO MEET
MY WIFE I WILL BE
CUTTING YOU LIKE
THE VEIL'**

LOSING FAMILY AND FRIENDS FOR CHRIST

'Rachel* was working in a bakery when she first heard the gospel. At the time she suffered from numbness in her body so, when a Christian prayed for her to be healed and her health recovered the following day, she was drawn to Christ.

Rachel, who comes from a Muslim background, was baptised in 2014 at the age of 19. Three years later her mother had begun to suffer from a stomach complaint so she told her that Jesus could heal her, as He had Rachel. Her prayers were answered and her mother came to faith as a result, being baptised shortly afterwards. She has remained pain-free to this day.

Although she had become a follower of Jesus, Rachel did not change her official identity as a Muslim for fear that her neighbours or other family members would have disowned her but she has a strong desire to tell others about Jesus and has shared the gospel in another part of Indonesia.

'I see from Scripture that God had chosen me; I had not chosen Him, so I had a duty to tell others about God,' she said.

'On one island we told others the good news about Jesus healing illness and forgiving sins. People were open-minded

PRAY FOR

- Peace, courage and protection for Ber and his family
- Protection for John and Leah and that their parents would come to faith
- Courage, protection and perseverance for Denda
- Boldness for Rachel as she shares the gospel
- Restoration in Esther's relationship with her mother

and responded; they had never heard it before. They were baptised and became believers.'

She added; 'Persecution hasn't come there yet but it will come on that island as it is small and people will find out.'

Although there has been no negative reaction to her ministry on the island, Rachel was questioned by the police in connection with the accusations made against Ber (see main story, p7).

'They came to my home. I was very scared. It was the first time the police had interrogated me.'

As the story became public, her uncle accused her of 'not being a good Muslim' and said that she would no longer be part of their family. He has not spoken to her since.

'Friends knew that I had become a Christian because I had been baptised. [At first] they said they would still meet with me but that I was an infidel. Then they cut off the friendships altogether.'

Rachel holds no bitterness towards them. She said: 'It is ok they don't want to see me because I have God and am part of His family.'

*Names changed to protect identities

All photos © Release International 2026.



'Esther'* was born into a Christian community but as a child was expelled from the family home by her mother who had turned to Islam and remarried.

'My mother did not want me to live with her,' she said. 'She did not care about me. [As such] I have never felt a mother's love and I'm afraid that she might die and we may never have a relationship.'

Esther, who was brought up by her Christian grandmother, added: 'I want to fix my relationship with my family and tell them about Jesus but it's difficult for me to call them. [My mother] does not want me to call her Mum as she has other children now.'

PLEASE HELP OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

In Indonesia and around the world today Christians face hostility from a number of different sources: family members, local communities, hostile authorities and militant groups.

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

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



HELPING OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS



Li Yingqiang and Zhang Xinyue recorded a short video before their arrest

COUPLE'S VIDEO MESSAGE FOR CHILDREN AHEAD OF CRACKDOWN

CHINESE BELIEVERS PREPARE FOR MORE REPRESSION AS CHRISTIANS DETAINED AND CHURCH CROSSES DEMOLISHED

A Christian couple in China recorded a video message for their young children in which they braced them for their imminent arrest and separation.

On January 8 a pre-recorded film circulated online showing a message left in advance by Li Yingqiang, an elder at Early Rain Covenant Church, a Protestant house church in Chengdu in southwest China, and his wife, Zhang Xinyue. In the video, they say to their children:

'Carson, little brother, if one day you do not see Mom and Dad any more, remember the hymn we sang together today.'

They then sing the hymn, *As the*

Mountains Surround Jerusalem, with the lyrics: 'As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people.'

What the video reveals is the couple's preparation for the possibility of losing their freedom and being separated from their children.

Just two days before the video appeared online, police in Chengdu launched a new round of large-scale arrests targeting Early Rain church. Li Yingqiang and Zhang Xinyue were both detained. Their two children, 14-year-old Carson and her 11-year-old brother, were also taken to a police station, where they spent the night. The siblings are now being looked after by their grandmother.

There is widespread concern that Zhang Xinyue, who has long suffered from depression, may face serious risks to her physical and mental well-being under police fatigue-style, high-pressure interrogations and threats.

On the same day, several core members of the church were also taken away. At the time of writing, a number of individuals remained detained and lawyers were not permitted to meet them.

This marks another large-scale operation targeting Early Rain, seven years after the mass arrests of

Wang Yi was sentenced to nine years in prison



“ EVERY TIME THERE'S A MAJOR CRACKDOWN, THERE IS MUCH MORE RAPID GROWTH ”

December 2018 when more than 100 Christians, including Pastor Wang Yi, the leader of the church, were taken into police custody and were unreachable. For the more than 500 members of the church, almost every household had a heavy police presence stationed outside its home. Pastor Wang was eventually tried in secret and sentenced to nine years in prison.

PHYSICAL ASSAULT

Another Early Rain church member, Chen Yunfei, who had been warned not to speak out on social media, was physically assaulted by unknown individuals under the pretext of a dispute near his home on January 8. He required four stitches over his eye.

Families and lawyers say that in most cases the authorities have not presented formal legal documents to them, and that the specific charges and detention locations remain unclear.

Dr Bob Fu, the founder and president of Release International's partner, ChinaAid, said that the new arrests marked *'yet another grave escalation in the CCP's campaign to eradicate independent Christian faith. These are not criminals or extremists — they are peaceful pastors and lay leaders whose only "crime" is shepherding their congregations outside the control of the Party-state.'*

He added: *'Urge Christians worldwide to pray for the imprisoned leaders and their families, and for the courage of China's underground churches.'*

The arrests in Chengdu followed a nationwide crackdown on urban house churches including ones in Beijing and Shanghai.

Dr Fu said in a recent interview with a Release International associate ministry: *'There are two major reasons for targeting urban house church movements. Number one is their explosive growth and secondly the CCP's power is being weakened because of the economic downturn and the enormous social unrest so, to Xi Jinping [China's President], any social organisation that is not under his absolute control is a political threat.'*

He said that government attempts to pull down church crosses and brand them as *'a threat to national security'*



Bob Fu said government actions had simply stirred people's interest in Christianity

had backfired by stirring people's curiosity about Christianity.

'Every time there's a major crackdown, there is much more rapid [church] growth.'

CHURCH RAIDED

One church that had its cross and bell tower demolished last December was Yayang Church in Wenzhou, Zhejiang, southeast China.

Up to 1,000 police officers were involved in the raid on the church in an operation to enforce national flag installation.

While drones buzzed overhead and mobile phones were seized from the congregation, black hoods were forced over the heads of more than 100 Christians as counter-terrorism-style tactics were deployed.

It is understood that 20 church members remained detained at the time of writing.

Wenzhou has long been known as China's 'Jerusalem' with its dense Christian population, and has therefore become a focus for religious control.

PRAY FOR

- God's protection and provision for Li Yingqiang, his wife and their children. Pray too that God would guard Zhang Xinyue's mental and physical health
- Chen Yunfei's physical healing
- Release from detention for all Early Rain Covenant Church members, including Pastor Wang Yi, and that the unjust cases against them would be dismissed
- All those affected by raids in Wenzhou to remain strong in their faith
- Supernatural strength for Christian prisoners in China and others who have been intimidated and harassed. Pray too for the lawyers representing them

Release International supporters can help Early Rain Covenant Church and Yayang Church members by sharing their stories in UK congregations and on social media, thereby raising prayer and awareness and adding to pressure to hold the Chinese Communist Party accountable for its actions.

Kurdistan has become a haven for those fleeing war, oppression and religious persecution



**'I HAVE AT LAST
A FAMILY THAT
LOVES ME!'**

ON A RECENT TRIP TO IRAQ, **ALEX SMYTHE** SAW HOW A PARTNER'S MINISTRY IS PROVIDING HOPE AND HEALING FOR THOSE TRAUMATISED BY PAIN AND REJECTION

Life probably does not get much worse than your own mother rejecting you – and then hiring a hitman to kill you!

Sadly that is precisely what happened to 'Ibrahim'*, whom a Release International team met on a recent trip to the autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq.

Ibrahim, who has a strict Muslim background, experienced a deeply traumatic childhood marked by abuse from his family – all against the backdrop of the sectarian violence and bloodshed of Baghdad following Saddam Hussein's removal from power in 2003.

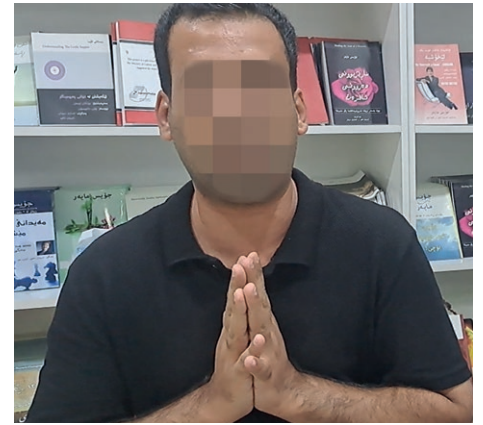
He was raised with a fear of God – whom he associated with punishment and terror – which left him with unresolved questions, a rebellious nature and emotional wounds that carried into his adult life.

In his early twenties, Ibrahim moved in with his aunt, who lived in an apartment rented from a Christian family. The kindness and warmth he experienced from them shattered the prejudices against Christians he had been taught as a child and began to spark his curiosity about the religion they followed.

That interest began to blossom during a trip to Turkey when Christian friends invited him to church. At first, he refused to go but, after a disturbing dream that night in which a 'man of radiant light' rescued him from being dragged into a pit, he felt overcome with fear as well as guilt that he had offended God by not going to the service. So, that next day, he returned to the church with a sincere desire to understand Christians and their beliefs.

After a simple word to him from a believer there brought peace to his anxious heart, he gave his life to Christ and began attending services.

However, his faith journey was to be far from easy. As a result of legal issues with his residency in Turkey, Ibrahim was detained for several months, during which time he experienced both disappointment and betrayal. Money that had been sent to support his travel plans was never fully delivered to him, and, when he tried to reclaim it, he was



Before he went to church Ibrahim associated God with punishment and terror

met with silence and rejection.

After a failed and traumatic attempt to reach Europe — he was arrested, beaten and sent back to Turkey with nothing but the clothes on his back — Ibrahim was forced to return to Iraq in 2023. There, his family discovered his conversion to Christianity and he was declared a disgrace.

His mother publicly cursed him, barred him from meals with the family and told him he would not be allowed burial in their cemetery. Abandoned, isolated and physically unwell, he spent several months emotionally and spiritually crushed.

On top of this, his mother even paid for a hitman to kill him – her only son! Thankfully, however, he was able to contact our partners in Kurdistan in time and, despite having no money or support, was welcomed into their safe house.

His arrival coincided with the early stages of establishing a new congregation in the city so Ibrahim immediately began helping with the construction of the church as well as in the services themselves.

After a short return visit to Baghdad, in which he was again rejected and mistreated by his family, he travelled back to Kurdistan and has lived in the safe house ever since.

The opportunity to serve in the church has been a turning point in Ibrahim's life. It was not just physical shelter that he found in the safe house, but spiritual restoration and emotional healing. Through prayer, discipleship and meaningful service, he began to

“
THEY HAVE GIVEN ME A NEW PURPOSE IN LIFE’



Syrian refugees with vital food parcels provided by our partner

experience freedom from bitterness, shame and fear. He speaks openly about the transformative power of forgiveness and how serving others helped him to rediscover his dignity and purpose.

Today, Ibrahim faithfully serves in the church, surrounded by a spiritual family that supports him. His story is one of resilience, grace and the healing power of a safe, loving Christian community.

Ibrahim said: *'Nearly all my life I faced rejection: as a child I always felt that my mother and family didn't love me and I was treated badly as a child. Later on, after the fall of Saddam Hussain in Baghdad, I felt rejected by the community as I came from a Sunni family – and now the majority Shia population were turning on the Sunni minority. Then, when I became a Christian, I faced even more rejection from my family – particularly from my mother, who said she would have me killed if she could. I was always told*

by my family that Christians and the church were "bad" people but instead I have found them to be kind, loving and caring – and I have at last got a family that loves me. They have given me a new purpose in life to serve God.'

HOW RELEASE INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS HELP

Kurdistan, which has become a haven for those fleeing war, oppression and religious persecution, provided a safe refuge when Islamic State, the jihadist group, rampaged across northern Iraq a decade ago, killing and displacing Yazidis, Christians, other minorities and public servants of any faith (writes John Lawson).

It has also taken in around 300,000 Syrians fleeing the Assad dictatorship, the long civil war and the continuing sectarian violence since Assad fell in 2011.

Every month or so our partner's team provides vital food parcels to Syrian war widows as well as to Iraqis in camps for the internally displaced. Currently about 200 widows are receiving this support and more than 60 of them have started regularly attending the weekly Arabic fellowship at the church. Some of the women who are particularly vulnerable live in a safe house. With their immediate material needs met, and in a place of safety, they have the opportunity – often for the first time in their lives – seriously to consider spiritual matters.

'Aisha'* said: *'During that difficult time, I met some people who told me about the Lord Jesus Christ. Their words felt different from anything I had heard before — filled with peace, love and a quiet invitation to a new life filled with hope. I listened, I reflected and I began to sense something real reaching my heart. I felt that God saw me, knew my pain and wanted to give me a fresh start. That encounter led me to faith and began a spiritual journey that changed*

me from the inside out. It was a turning point in my life. The safe house was not just a shelter; it was a place that embraced me at my most vulnerable, where I finally felt that I was not alone and that God had not forgotten me.'

She continued: 'In the safe house, I found the peace I had long been missing. After years of fear and uncertainty, I could finally breathe. I could rest, pray, read the Bible and reflect on God's word without fear. I discovered the quiet strength that comes with stability, and how much healing can happen when a person is simply allowed to feel safe. That house gave me space to live out my faith in peace. It was there that I could finally think, pray and thank God for His mercy. It was more than just a physical shelter — it was a place of spiritual renewal, of emotional rest, of new beginnings.'

'I am deeply grateful to everyone who had a hand in opening that door for me, and to all those who continue to support places like this. The safe house gave me a chance to stand on my feet again and taste the comfort of safety after years of fear and displacement.'

It is not only Syrian refugees and IDPs from other parts of Iraq who are benefiting from a fresh start through our partner's work. The work provides opportunities for Iranians who are seeking God to come out of Iran for a week and learn about the gospel with, and from, other believers, in peace, quiet and safety, before returning to their own country to live out their new Christian faith in their own communities – with all the risks and pressures that brings.

Paul Robinson, Release International CEO, said: *'The work of our partner in Kurdistan shines brightly in an often dark region of the world. Your support for their ministry, through Release International, is helping to feed the orphan and the widow, bringing good news to the poor and releasing the oppressed to start living and sharing the light, love and hope of Jesus Christ. Please continue to pray for this precious ministry and all involved with it and for the people and future of Kurdistan.'*

*Names changed to protect identities



Aisha found healing simply by being in a safe place

A poignant reminder

I joined Release International as Chief Operating Officer a year ago and knew at some point I would head out to spend time with one of our partners, in order to see first-hand how our international work is done and, crucially, to observe the impact it has.

Little did I know that I would end up in Kurdistan as my first experience of our work – and what an experience it was!

Having never been to that part of the world, and despite briefings before the trip, I was not sure what to expect. Needless to say, I was nervous but also excited about what lay ahead. Would I simply observe what our partners were doing or in some way participate in their ministry?

As it turned out the answer was both, although helping to baptise nine Iranians at the end of their week of intense Bible training was the highlight. Being able to worship Christ together in our own languages – me in English, them in Farsi – proved one of the most joyous experiences of my life.

Among those being baptised was a young boy and his parents, who, like the others, had been prepared to travel in secret to study God's word and be baptised and then return to Iran where living out their faith would undoubtedly mean hardship, secrecy and potentially imprisonment.

That juxtaposition of the joy of worship and baptism and the thought of what could lie ahead for them in Iran was a poignant reminder to me of just how important it is, not only to be inspired by believers such as these, but also to commit to support them in prayer.

Nick Bending



I DISCOVERED ... HOW MUCH HEALING CAN HAPPEN WHEN A PERSON IS SIMPLY ALLOWED TO FEEL SAFE'

The church, which was targeted by a mob 20 years ago, remains a beacon of light in the community



SHINING THE LIGHT OF JESUS

JAMES FRASER TRAVELLED TO AN EGYPTIAN VILLAGE TO SEE HOW ONE CHURCH AND A CHRISTIAN CO-OPERATIVE ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

It is 20 years since two believers were killed in a mob attack on its church but the minority Christian community remains vulnerable.

We are travelling to a village in Upper Egypt to meet Father R, a Coptic Christian leader whose church hosts a sewing co-operative that was formed with funding from Release International to help believers to make a living.

As we approach the entrance to the village our partner instructs us to draw the black-out blinds on the car windows. Millions of Western tourists visit Egypt every year but the villages

are not typical destinations and our presence there would have drawn unhelpful attention to the Christians we were visiting.

After driving down a noisy street filled with people, donkeys, carts, motorbikes and 4x4s we were dropped off in a side alley and led into the Coptic church compound through a back door. Once inside, tensions eased and we were welcomed into Father R's office.

He greeted us warmly but it was impossible not to notice a large screen on the wall behind his desk displaying images from multiple CCTV cameras dotted around the building – a reminder of the continuously precarious security context for recognised places of Christian worship in Upper Egypt.

The fact that we were sitting in a church, however, says a lot for the way in which Father R has interacted with the community since the attack – the peak of persecution, as he describes it. Although two Christians were killed in the violence and fires were lit around the church, which had only just been built, the building survived.

It continues to be difficult for believers to get permission to build in Egyptian villages because many Muslims consider it shameful to have a church in their area, while local police can also resist development, but, in the aftermath of the attack, Father R resisted the temptation for the Christian community to retreat from view and harbour resentment against their Muslim neighbours.

Instead he was determined to lead his people on an alternative, more demanding but more fruitful path – demonstrating humility, kindness and forgiveness. He gave small gifts to Muslim children he met in the street, he attended community weddings and funerals, he made sure the church doors were open to visitors all through the week and he refused the use of a church car in order to identify more closely with the struggles of the local people. Critically he instigated dialogue with local Muslim leaders.

Progress has been slow and there have been setbacks, but Father R believes this approach has built a degree of protection, understanding and respect for Christians.

'People see the fruit over the long term,' he said. 'It has taken 20 years to build this trust and reputation through practical acts. The lived-out message of Christ protects us.' He said that while trying to settle a recent dispute in the Muslim community, one of their leaders had commented, *'We need to learn from Christians and how they forgive.'*

“
**THE LIVED-
OUT MESSAGE
OF CHRIST
PROTECTS US'**



Agatha benefits from being part of a sewing co-operative with other widows

As part of this process Father R has witnessed spiritual growth and holistic development within the Christian community.

He said that before the church was built, *'we were in darkness. Previously, Christians in the village were very [poor] economically, educationally and spiritually.'*

However, income-generating projects, funded in part by Release International, have improved living standards. A new generation of young people have better access to education and are entering more highly paid professions with promising futures. Dialogue with the Muslim community has developed trust and enabled disputes to be resolved before they escalate. There is no true equality, but life has improved, partly because the Christian community now has a sense of confidence and assurance in its identity.

Christians are still in the minority and many of their neighbours continue to resent the presence of the church, but they are here to stay, and are determined to live in peace with everyone. They will not fight back if attacked but neither will they run.

Reflecting on this *'turn the other cheek'* approach, Father R added: *'The church*

is a lighthouse in the village to shine the light of Christ.'

SEWING CO-OPERATIVE

After leaving Father R's office we were introduced to a Christian widow who has run a small sewing co-operative from the church compound for the past three years. 'Agatha'* has seen bereavement and ill health in her life and before joining the co-operative was isolated at home and depressed. However, now she is full of joy and purpose. She shone with pride as she showed off the impressive rugs and bags she had made along with the five other widows who are part of the group.

Our partner told us that the support Release International provides to help to fund co-operatives such as this one makes a significant difference both in terms of financial income and spiritual encouragement. Agatha said, *'Even if no one knows us, we are part of the body of Christ. God compensates us on earth and in heaven.'*

In total the Release International project aims to help around 2,000 people spread across 100 villages in Upper Egypt. As well as income-generating grants, it includes providing for basic living needs, home repairs and pastoral care.

*Name changed to protect identity

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL AND YOUR CHURCH



Paul Robinson, Release International CEO, gets into practice for the Light Walk Challenge

LIGHT WALK CHALLENGE



INSPIRED by the courage of persecuted Christians around the world, Release International's CEO, Paul Robinson, will be leading a team of supporters on a sponsored walk up England's highest peak — in the middle of the night!

Setting out at 1am on Sunday, June 14, the team will carry a large wooden cross to the summit of Scafell Pike, aiming to raise it as dawn breaks — a powerful symbol of the light of Christ shining in the darkest places.

The sponsored Light Walk Challenge event seeks to raise awareness and £25,000 of support for persecuted Christians who live for Jesus in some of the darkest and most difficult places in the world today.

You can support Paul and the team at justgiving.com/campaign/lightwalkchallenge

FABULOUS FUNDRAISERS

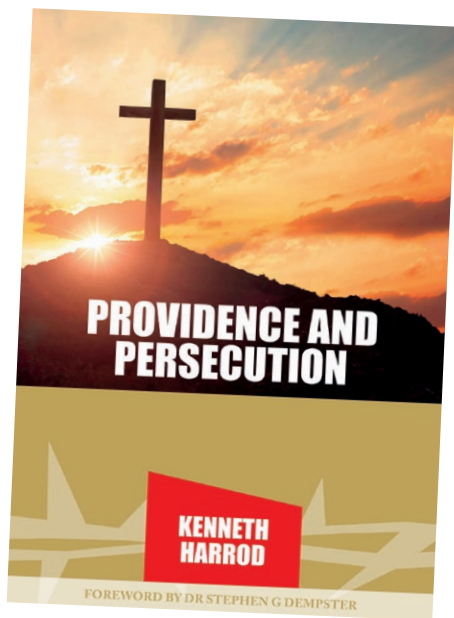
One of those joining Paul Robinson on the Light Walk Challenge will be supporter Timi from southeast London, who last December ran 21km through the streets of the capital to raise more than £1,300 for the work of Release International.

Also fundraising this year is supporter Nic from southwest London, who will be taking part in the 100km Jurassic Coast Ultra Challenge in May. Nic said: *'I want to put myself well out of my comfort zone, to stand alongside those who daily are out of theirs through no fault of their own.'* Visit justgiving.com/page/nic-bianchi-1 to find out more and support Nic.

A huge thanks to Timi, Nic and all the other Release International supporters who are raising funds to help persecuted Christians around the world.



Timi (top), who completed a sponsored run to raise funds for persecuted Christians last year, will be taking part in the Light Walk Challenge, while Nic is preparing for a 100km fundraising challenge in May along the Jurassic Coast



Book 'worth its weight in gold'

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL'S latest book, *Providence and Persecution*, which is written by Kenneth Harrod, has attracted favourable comments from a number of sources, ranging from Nigeria to Australia.

A reviewer in Australia wrote: 'Many of us wrestle with the doctrine of God's sovereignty as we try to reconcile it with the suffering endured by so many – including the persecuted. We struggle to understand how God can be good when,

in His sovereignty, His children face imprisonment, violence, and even death for the sake of Christ. These struggles are precisely why theological works written by Bible-believing scholars are worth their weight in gold.

'Books like this are invaluable because, with the help of trusted teachers, we are able to see Scriptural truth more clearly for the strengthening of our own walk with the Lord. I commend this book for that very reason – that it would deepen your confidence in God's sovereign purposes, even in the midst of suffering.'

Providence and Persecution, which seeks to offer both theological depth and pastoral care, includes an afterward by Petr Jasek, who spent more than a year in a Sudanese prison for his Christian work.

'This is a book for all Christians to read, to pray over and by it to be strengthened in their faith,' said Archbishop Ben Kwashi, Release International partner in Nigeria, while John Stevens, National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, said: *'Reading this book will certainly change the way that you view persecution, and may change the way you view God.'*

Obtain your copy for £10 (including postage & packing) from our website shop (releaseinternational.org) or by calling 01689 823491.



LEADING ROLE AT NEW FESTIVAL

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL has a leading role in this year's inaugural Rising Lights festival in Torquay.

The event is a five-day gathering for Christians of all denominations, running from April 6-10, and is seen by many as a replacement for Word Alive, which closed two years ago. Organised by the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, Rising Lights will include morning Bible readings from the book of Philippians, seminars, and programmes for youngsters.

Release International will be the focus of one of the main evening celebrations, hosted by CEO Paul Robinson. The programme will include video testimony from a number of our partners, on-stage interviews and biblical input.

EXHIBITIONS

As well as taking part in Rising Lights we will be sharing stories of the persecuted at a number of other Christian events in the UK this year.

If you are planning to attend any of the following, please do come and say hello at our stand. We would love to see you.

- **May** AOG leaders' conferences in Scotland, England and Wales; Baptist Assembly
- **July** Keswick Port Stewart; New Wine
- **August** Keswick Convention (week 3); ReFuel; Big Church Festival

In fond memory

Linda Oxburgh (pictured), who has died aged 74, worked as Release International's Development Manager for Scotland for nine years until her retirement in 2016. She had a deep commitment to all those who suffered for their faith in Christ and had a particular love for persecuted brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka, whom she continued to visit and support in a voluntary capacity after stepping down from her staff role. We thank God for her many years of service and pray for comfort for her family in their loss.



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:
James on 07434 894016

London & South:
Jonny on 07861 656269

Central England & Wales:
Allister on 07916 396178

Scotland & North of England:
James on 07434 894016

OPPRESSION CANNOT STOP GOD'S PURPOSES

STEPHEN MCILROY
REFLECTS ON THE
TRIALS ENDURED BY
ONE OF GOD'S PRE-
EMINENT SERVANTS

In the book of Genesis God paints the picture of a wonderful man of faith, who was asked to endure much suffering. The life of Joseph (chapter 37 onwards) is that of someone who, like many Christians around the world today, faithfully persevered despite years of dark oppression. For Joseph, of course, there was also immense blessing.

The well-known narrative tells of the favoured and beloved son of Jacob, who became a slave in an alien land as a result of the callous betrayal and unjust spite of his 11 brothers. The slave Joseph is sold to a high-ranking military man of the Egyptian empire and, no doubt due to his God-given talents, all starts to go well for him.

In fact God increases His blessing and grants human favour to Joseph through his Egyptian owner, Potiphar. Joseph finds himself in charge of all his master's assets, with nothing held back from him apart from the official's wife.

The impression we get of Joseph is that of a handsome young man whose looks do not go unnoticed by Potiphar's wife. Her first seductive approach might have left Joseph feeling flattered, but it is obvious that he repeatedly refused her advances. Joseph had attempted to avoid any hint of infidelity, displaying admirable integrity while realising the potential for betrayal of his owner and for sinning against God.

Joseph fled her final attempt at seduction but his reward for restraint was that Potiphar's wife, consumed by scorn, falsely accused Joseph of trying to sexually assault her. A slave possessed no rights and there was no court of appeal for him!

We may think that today's world is different but we regularly hear of Christians in places such as Pakistan who are falsely accused even though they have tried to lead lives of integrity. Christians working in brick kilns can be nothing more than bonded slave labourers without rights, while evangelists and pastors are falsely accused of blasphemy simply for sharing the gospel.

The innocent Joseph found himself oppressed and once again in the darkest of places – prison. By rights he probably should have been executed but the fact that he was not suggests that Potiphar may not have been wholly convinced of his guilt.

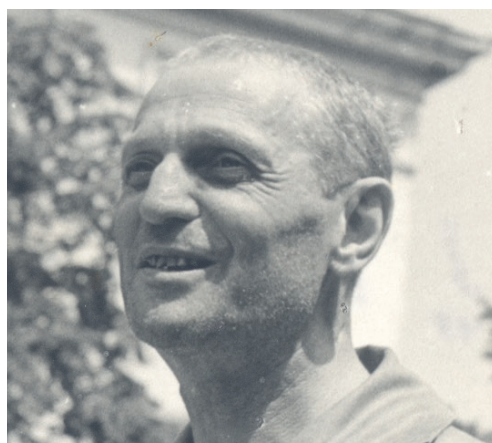
Incarcerated, isolated and lonely, it is remarkable that Joseph does not appear to have sulked or complained about his new surroundings.

For persecuted Christians today who experience incarceration or feel imprisoned by their circumstances, the story of Joseph acts as an inspiration to persevere in their faith, trusting that God is working out His sovereign purposes in their lives.

We too can draw hope from the story when people mistreat us, knowing that, similarly, God will use the circumstances for His purpose and our good, and maybe for the good of many others in the long term.



**A SLAVE POSSESSED
NO RIGHTS AND
THERE WAS NO
COURT OF APPEAL!**



INSPIRING FAITH

'Friendship with Jesus is costly. Faith alone saves, but saving faith is never alone. It is always accompanied by great sacrifices for Christ's sake'

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 pay any donations. Please notify us if you want to 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.

Name of account holder

Account number Sort code

Name of your Bank/Building Society

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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.

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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians



PRAYER SHIELD



Mark Mukan ministers to traumatised Christians

APRIL 2026

Heavenly Father,

As we approach Easter we remember that Jesus calls all who want to follow Him to deny themselves and take up their cross (Matt 16:24-26). As such we pray for the Holy Spirit's enabling (2 Tim 1:7) for all those for whom being Christ's disciple means enduring hostility and oppression.

Grant them wisdom in how they celebrate His 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.

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

NIGERIA

WEDNESDAY 1: Pray for our partner, Rev Mark Mukan, and his wife, Eunice, as they minister to those who have lost everything. Pray that God will protect them from the effects of witnessing so much trauma and keep filling them with his love, grace and energy. Pray too for good health for another partner, Mark Lipdo, and particularly for his wife, Peace, who is recovering from surgery.

THURSDAY 2: Pray for each of the 542 pastors who received training from Rev Mark Mukan during 2025. Pray for them as they put it into practice in their ministries, which are likely to involve caring for the traumatised.

GOOD FRIDAY 3: As we turn our eyes to the cross and Jesus's ultimate sacrifice at the

hands of his persecutors, let us pray for those perpetrating violence against believers in Nigeria, whether Islamist terrorists, militant jihadist herdsmen or criminal gangs.

SATURDAY 4: Pray that the police and security forces, particularly in states across Nigeria's violent Middle Belt, will be able to protect the communities they serve as well as stop those perpetrating attacks on Christians.

EASTER SUNDAY 5: Thank God for the power that raised Jesus from the dead and that those in Nigeria and elsewhere who have seen their loved ones



Like many other Nigerian Christians Pastor Gideon Dawell lost his family and home in an attack by militants

martyred do not need to grieve as the world does because of our resurrection hope in Christ.

MONDAY 6: Give thanks for the generosity of UK churches and individual Christians, which has enabled us to increase our funding for vital food supplies and trauma-healing workshops for believers who have been attacked. Pray that these projects will make a real difference in their lives.

TUESDAY 7: Pray for Pastor Gideon Dawell (pictured) as he moves into a new house, funded by our associate ministry. His family home was destroyed by militants who killed his wife and five children. Pray for replacement or restored housing for all those who have lost their homes in violent attacks.

IRAN

WEDNESDAY 8: Pray for Aida Najaflou, Joseph Shabazian, Nasser Navard and a believer known as Mahfouz who are being held in prison for their Christian faith. Pray that God will uphold and protect them and hasten their release.

THURSDAY 9: Pray for the families of all Iranian Christian prisoners. Having a spouse, parent or child in prison can be traumatic enough in itself without the added practical challenges that go with it. Pray that God will bless them and provide support for them through these testing times.

FRIDAY 10: Pray for God's anointing on students undertaking theological studies through online university courses who will become the

next generation of Iranian church leaders.

SATURDAY 11: Pray for our partner, Transform Iran, and its ministry with Iranian Christians in neighbouring countries, some of which are also becoming increasingly hostile to Christianity and have arrested and detained believers. Some face challenging residency issues that could end in deportation back to Iran.

SUNDAY 12: Pray for God's blessing on Transform Iran's innovative use of online technology to spread the gospel throughout the Persian-speaking world, and for all who encounter Christ in this way.

MONDAY 13: Pray for new Iranian believers recently baptised by our partner in a neighbouring country. Pray that

PRAYERSHIELD

God will bless and guide them in their faith after this bold commitment.

TUESDAY 14: Lift up in prayer all the house churches and underground fellowships in Iran. Pray for God's blessing on their ministry, and protection and wisdom for their leaders.

NORTH KOREA

WEDNESDAY 15: Deacon Jang, also known as Zhang Wen Shi, was recently released from prison in North Korea. Please pray for his continued recovery.

THURSDAY 16: Pray for those living in North Korea who come to faith as a result of listening to gospel radio broadcasts produced by our partners. Pray for their protection.

FRIDAY 17: Please pray for wisdom for 'Cheol-myung', a North Korean who risks his life distributing Bibles inside the 'Hermit Kingdom'.

SATURDAY 18: Pray that everyone who receives a Bible in North Korea – no matter their background – would encounter God through His word.

SUNDAY 19: Pray for God's care and comfort for 'Sun-hee', a North Korean woman living in China. She is a Christian but was hurt deeply by an unhealthy church group.

MONDAY 20: Pray for God's blessing on North Korean defectors who are participating in Bible translation through our partner's project.

TUESDAY 21: Pray for frontline worker 'Myeong-su', who



Deacon Jang spent 11 years in prison

discreetly evangelises North Korean labourers working outside the country.

PAKISTAN

WEDNESDAY 22: Pray for Sofia whose eldest daughter was abducted and forced to marry a Muslim. Despite managing to obtain a divorce and returning to her family, she was subsequently beaten and kidnapped again. Sofia does not know if she will ever see her daughter again.

THURSDAY 23: Many Christians fear that their daughters are not safe. Pray for the countless Christian girls who have been targeted for abduction and forced marriage because they are considered inferior and powerless.

FRIDAY 24: Give thanks for Strength to Stand groups, run by our partners, which equip women in Pakistan to stand firm against discrimination and to provide for their families through small businesses, while encouraging them in their Christian discipleship.

SATURDAY 25: Many Muslim hairdressers refuse to cut the hair of Christians. Pray for believers with a vision to train as hairdressers so this practical need in the Christian community can be met.

SUNDAY 26: Following a dispute over children playing in the street, several Christian families in one mixed religious community were threatened with having their houses burnt down. Pray that the issue would be resolved peacefully.

MONDAY 27: Pray for Christians Ramad, Nasreen and their daughter Iram who were cheated out of a large sum of money by a Muslim landowner. The family faces having to repay a number of debts.

TUESDAY 28: Pray that our partners serving the Christian women of Pakistan would be refreshed and encouraged. It can be exhausting ministering in an environment of constant discrimination and hostility.

SUDAN

WEDNESDAY 29: Please pray for a Sudanese couple, 'Tala' and 'Demi', who were forced to leave Sudan by the army. Tala was a successful businessman and Demi a professor in Khartoum where she used her skills to help the blind. They lost everything and are now in Egypt being supported by our partners.

THURSDAY 30: Pray for peace in this war-torn land and that multitudes will turn to Christ within Sudan just as many in the diaspora are doing.

MAY 2026 CENTRAL ASIA

FRIDAY 1: A law was introduced in Kyrgyzstan last year which denies legal registration to religious communities with fewer than 500 members. Pray for churches that cannot meet this requirement and are forced to practise their faith underground.

SATURDAY 2: Last September secret police raided the Sunday worship service of the unregistered Council of Churches Baptist Church in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek. The pastor, Dmitri Golovin, and a church deacon were detained and fined. Pray that the church will be able to continue despite the pressure.

SUNDAY 3: Pray for Christians in several parts of Central Asia who have been sanctioned in various ways for peacefully expressing opposition to the Russian war in Ukraine.

MONDAY 4: Give thanks for a continued easing of restrictions in Uzbekistan where our partner, 'Pavel', says: *'The lives of Christians and the ministries of churches have changed significantly for the better.'*

TUESDAY 5: Pray for our partner as he works throughout the region, providing encouragement and developing vision and strategy with church leaders.

WEDNESDAY 6: Pray that the Bible and other Christian



Pastor Thongkham, pictured with his wife, was shot dead in 2024

resources are increasingly made available in local languages, especially those of ethnic minorities in countries across the region.

THURSDAY 7: Pray for churches as they reach out with the gospel; there is an openness to hearing about Christ in many local communities.

LAOS

FRIDAY 8: Pray for our partner in Laos who organises regular training seminars for church leaders in a neighbouring country. These provide teaching on a range of subjects, encourage resilience and facilitate much-needed opportunities for fellowship.

SATURDAY 9: Pray for the family of Pastor Thongkham who was shot dead in July 2024 after being warned over his 'Christian activities'. His wife and their two teenage children continue to serve God despite their loss.

SUNDAY 10: Pray for 'Lomg',

a 33-year-old mother of four, who has been under constant pressure from her husband since she began to follow Christ. He has threatened to divorce her, saying: *'I hate her because she believes [in] God.'*

MONDAY 11: Three families in a remote area of Laos were driven from their homes while villagers demolished their houses and confiscated their land and livestock. This attack followed weeks of mounting aggression. Pray for God's abundant provision for these Christians who have been given only small amounts of rice to survive on.

TUESDAY 12: Pray for Christian leader 'Lom' whose family were driven from their home; he was chained to a post for four days. His family are now unable to return to their home and are being closely watched and prohibited from seeking help.

WEDNESDAY 13: Pray for 'Yeun' and 'Vanhdee', a Laotian couple who became followers of Jesus when their daughter was healed. This decision led to them being rejected by Yeun's family. His mother took back land she had given them and said: *'If you want to keep your faith, then don't call me mother.'* Pray for this couple as they continue to follow Jesus.

THURSDAY 14: Pray for 'ThaoSeng', 51, who recently became a follower of Jesus and is now facing expulsion from her village if she refuses to renounce Him. Pray that she will remain strong in her faith.

SYRIA

FRIDAY 15: Pray for church leaders throughout Syria as they guide their congregations through their country's transition. May they be able to speak wisdom into all the debates around their nation's future.

SATURDAY 16: Pray for peace between Syria's many different religious communities and an end to the persecution of Christians and other minorities.

SUNDAY 17: Pray for Syrian refugees across the Middle East and beyond, especially those who feel unwelcome in other countries. Ask God to guide them about whether to return to Syria and pray that those unable to return would find acceptance where they are.

MONDAY 18: Thank God for the many Syrians who have come to faith in Christ outside the country and want to minister to friends and family back home. Many face death threats for trying to do so. May God protect them and guide them.

TUESDAY 19: Pray for churches in the Middle East that are involved in mission into Syria. May God bless their efforts.

WEDNESDAY 20: Pray for the new Government and that it and the police and security forces would operate with integrity, impartiality and honesty in the interests of all Syrians.

THURSDAY 21: Pray for the children and youth of

Syria, many of whom are traumatised and have missed years of education. Pray for opportunities to learn, play and to recover.

CHINA

FRIDAY 22: Pray for Pastor 'Yang' and his wife, who are involved in student ministry. She was arrested while he was in another country and is facing a prison sentence. Yang knows that if he returns to China he is also likely to be arrested. They have two young children being cared for by relatives.

SATURDAY 23: Pray for Christian children in China who are some of the most severely persecuted. Under-18s are prohibited from taking part in any Christian activities. Christian children are often interrogated about their parents' activities and some have been forced to sign documents renouncing their faith.

SUNDAY 24: Dr Bob Fu of our partner, ChinaAid, believes that the Chinese Communist Party is seeking to eradicate the church. Pray that believers would hold firm in the face of increasing repression.

MONDAY 25: Pray for Christian parents to have great wisdom in bringing up their children. Public schools often push a communist, anti-religious ideology. At the same time parents are forbidden by law to evangelise and disciple their own children.

TUESDAY 26: Students in state education are taught so-called Bible stories where Jesus and

his disciples are portrayed as the unethical evil-doers. Pray that young people will be able to see through this propaganda and recognise the real Jesus.

WEDNESDAY 27: Pray for 'Will', a legal defence worker in China who takes significant risks to represent Christians and fight for justice for believers who have been unfairly arrested.

THURSDAY 28: Join with Pastor 'Shui', and countless others, who are hoping and praying for a day when there will be religious freedom in China. Pray that the church will flourish in the midst of repression.

ETHIOPIA

FRIDAY 29: Please pray for former Muslims such as 'Kifaru'. As soon as Kifaru became a believer, his family refused to feed him. When he began to share his faith he was attacked and stoned. Praise God for his faithfulness in leading others to Christ.

SATURDAY 30: Praise God for believers such as 'Kifaru' (see previous day), who are being trained in evangelism and mission by our partners in Ethiopia. There are a growing number of former Muslims who are reaching out to their communities and seeing new churches planted.

SUNDAY 31: Pray for the large numbers of believers from neighbouring countries (particularly Eritrea and Somalia) who are in Ethiopia and are growing in their faith.

JUNE 2026

ERITREA

MONDAY 1: Please continue to pray for long-term prisoners in Eritrea, some of whom, such as Kiflu Gebremeskel, have been in prison for more than 20 years. They deeply appreciate our prayers as well as the practical support given to their families over such a long time.

TUESDAY 2: Praise God for His continued faithfulness in keeping our brothers and sisters in prison strong in their faith as well as in their health. Thank God for the release of 45 Christian prisoners at the end of last year.

WEDNESDAY 3: Please continue to pray for our partners who work inside and outside Eritrea. Pray that they would know God's protection, favour, guidance and wisdom as they lead this sensitive ministry.

THURSDAY 4: Pray for the Christians who are being secretly trained to lead underground churches. They are fully aware of the risks that come with the calling but are willing to risk imprisonment for their faith.

'Pray for their spiritual and emotional health as they carry great responsibility and respond to many requests for help.'

*Paul Robinson,
Release International CEO*



Kiflu Gebremeskel has been imprisoned for more than 20 years

FRIDAY 5: Praise God for a recent increase in the number of Eritreans responding to the gospel, particularly among both teachers and students.

SATURDAY 6: Please pray for God's guidance, protection and wisdom for our partners as they support those who are suffering for their faith. *'Pray for their spiritual and emotional health as they carry great responsibility and respond to many requests for help,'* said Release International CEO Paul Robinson.

SUNDAY 7: Pray that exiled Christians, who are often

homesick, would be able to settle in their new communities and have fellowship with other believers.

ALGERIA

MONDAY 8: Pray that the Supreme Court of Algeria (which can overturn convictions and suspend sentences of pastors and can order the re-opening of closed churches) would act with courage, integrity and wisdom and would deal swiftly with church cases and appeals.

TUESDAY 9: Pray for the 50-plus church leaders

who have been convicted. Some have already been jailed and released while others are held in legal limbo by suspended sentences and long appeals. Pray that they and their families would know God's grace and patience as well as the energy to continue with their ministries.

WEDNESDAY 10: Lift up in prayer our partner, Pastor 'Yuba', and his wife, who continue to minister to Algerian Christians in these difficult times. Pray for God's protection over them, their family and their ministry.

THURSDAY 11: Pray that our partner's wife's ministry among Algerian women would flourish, despite the pressures they face.

FRIDAY 12: Algerian Christians face discrimination in many aspects of daily life, whether registering a birth, marriage or death, opening a bank account, applying for a job or running a business. Pray that they will be treated fairly.

SATURDAY 13: Pray for the 6,000 Algerian Bibles still held up in the port of Algiers after more than three years. Pray that the Bibles will be released and distributed and be a source of blessing for all who read them.

SUNDAY 14: Pray that while churches are closed, believers would find creative ways to meet and minister to each other.

SRI LANKA

MONDAY 15: Pray that Buddhist and Hindu extremists who stir up communities against Christians will be convicted of their sin and turn to Christ.

TUESDAY 16: Pray for the children of pastors and other ministry workers who often face neglect and marginalisation.

WEDNESDAY 17: Pray for the many small churches that are not able to meet mandatory registration requirements, meaning that they are often targeted by local authorities and pressured to stop meeting.

THURSDAY 18: Unregistered churches are often portrayed as 'illegal' and face the threat of mob violence for their activities. Pray that these believers will know God's peace, even when they are opposed by their communities.

FRIDAY 19: Pray for Pastor 'Isaac', who is in a lengthy legal battle. He faces threats to demolish his church building as well as opposition from police and religious militants.

SATURDAY 20: Thank God for Christian teachers such as Kumuduni Athapattu (see *Voice*, Jan-Mar 2026), who endure hostility and discrimination and yet continue faithfully to teach.

SUNDAY 21: Pray for our partners as they bring together Christian teachers

for an annual conference. This is a time of much-needed encouragement, refreshment and equipping.

LEBANON

MONDAY 22: Pray for our partner's dedicated discipleship and outreach teams who faithfully serve in challenging environments. May God grant them wisdom, discernment and clarity in every decision, and renew their passion for ministry.

TUESDAY 23: Pray for those who have recently come to faith in Christ, as they experience Christian fellowship, prayer, worship and discipleship. May God guide them and strengthen their faith through our partner's discipleship programmes.

WEDNESDAY 24: Pray for 'Michael' who was an Islamic scholar and now leads Christian discipleship groups in Lebanon and faces regular death threats from his family. His knowledge of both Islamic and Christian beliefs is invaluable for those seeking to learn about Christ.

THURSDAY 25: In a region marked by hardship, instability and persecution, please pray for protection for churches and especially their leaders and ministry teams.

FRIDAY 26: Ask God to renew and strengthen all those involved in different Christian ministries in Lebanon, which are becoming increasingly more demanding emotionally and physically.

SATURDAY 27: Pray for the country of Lebanon itself, which faces severe inflation, unemployment and political instability. These three factors have an impact on everyone, including the Christian population.

SUNDAY 28: Pray for protection for young Lebanese Christians who are using social media to spread the gospel in Arabic. Pray also that those reading the Bible, who may live in strict religious households, will be able to do so safely.

PHILIPPINES

MONDAY 29: Recently introduced legislation has broadened the reach of *Sharia* (Islamic law) and the Muslim legal system beyond the island of Mindanao to include other parts of the Philippines. This has increased the risk of severe persecution for those converting to Christianity and for those sharing their faith.



Pray for the growing number of Christians in the Philippines living under *Sharia*
Stock image

TUESDAY 30: Pray for believers on Mindanao and for the increasing numbers in the Philippines who are living under *Sharia*. Pray for wisdom and boldness as they follow Christ and make Him known. Pray too for the growing number of underground churches that are emerging.

Lord Jesus

We pray for all those who are persecuting Christians. Come, Holy Spirit, to convince them of the truth of Jesus's divinity and convict them of their sin, so that, as with the Apostle Paul, it will become so hard for them to 'kick against the goads' that they yield to Christ as Lord and join His followers! (Acts 9:5 and 26:14)

Amen

Sources: Article 18; ChinaAid; Forum 18; Middle East Concern; Release International associate ministries, partners and contacts; Transform Iran; Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Korea; VOM USA. 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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