



Praying for the Persecuted Church

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hope and aid for the persecuted church



Praying for the Persecuted Church 2020-2021

This booklet is provided to inspire and focus your prayers for our Lord's suffering people. Most pages are dedicated to a particular country where Christians experience discrimination, harassment or violence for His sake, giving background information and suggestions for prayer. Some pages focus on a particular group of persecuted believers, and the final page encourages us to rejoice in the glorious hope that we have in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, a hope that can sustain us all in our trials for Him.

Some Christians like to observe the traditional season of Lent to prepare themselves for Good Friday and Easter Day. The booklet has been structured for use during this time, with a page for every day from Ash Wednesday, 26 February, to Easter Day, 12 April. A reading plan for this period can be found on the inside back cover.

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Front cover: Christian young people in Bangladesh praying at a Barnabas supported leadership training seminar

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Page 47: Ibrahem Qasim, "Destroyed house in the south of Sanaa 12-6-2015-4"
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At

the heart of the Christian faith are the death and resurrection of our Saviour. The purpose of Jesus Christ's life was to offer Himself as a perfect, once and for all, sacrifice for the sins of His people.

Jesus Christ, literally, became sin for us and suffered unimaginably on Calvary's cross, so that we could be forgiven. Because He lived a perfect life His righteousness is credited to us, and we can rejoice as believers knowing we are righteous in God's sight and our eternal destiny is secure (2 Corinthians 5:21).

He drank every last dreg of the cup of suffering that His Father offered to Him. Submitting to His Father's will, as beads of sweat fell like drops of blood from His body, He said, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

In a short space of time, Jesus experienced acclaim as He entered Jerusalem, the agony of Gethsemane, betrayal, wrongful arrest, false imprisonment, beating and torture, an unjust trial, and death sentence, rejection by the crowds, abandonment by His disciples, and, above all else, the terrible moment when, as He bears all our sins, it seemed even the Father has turned away and He cries out in

anguish, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

Members of our persecuted family around the world know what it is like to be arrested on false charges, to be beaten, chased from their homes, locked in poverty by discrimination, rejected by their communities, and to suffer violence and even death for owning the Name of Jesus Christ.

The reality of Christian experience is born of pain and suffering. When all seems lost, we are given hope and strength to carry on, our eyes fixed on Christ – the Author and Perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). This experience refines our character in Christ and tests our faith.

But suffering in this life is not the end. Jesus died and rose again gloriously. The reality of His resurrection gives to believers the certain hope of eternal life with Him.

With this *Praying for the Persecuted Church* booklet, we can make a devotional voyage from agony to hope, from suffering to salvation and, ultimately, from death to life. As we meditate on Jesus' journey, we can walk with our persecuted brothers and sisters, in their anguish and hope, knowing the LORD our God in our midst is a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over us with gladness; he will quiet us by his love; he will exult over us with loud singing (Zephaniah 3:17).



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Afghanistan

Afghan Christians are either converts from Islam or the children of converts; they face severe penalties if their faith becomes known. Afghanistan is one of a few countries where the law imposes upon converts from Islam the death penalty for apostasy, in accordance with sharia, although no one has been executed in recent times. The converts also potentially face murder at the hands of relatives, members of the community, militants or the Taliban which controls part of the country. In recent years, radical Islamism has become more influential, particularly through the Deobandi movement.

Only the Lord knows the exact number of Afghan believers living in Afghanistan, but it is thought to be around 1,000. However, there could be many more secret believers. Many have fled to countries like Turkey and India.

Taliban-controlled areas ruthlessly enforce sharia and openly target Christians. The militant group Hezb-i-Islami (Islamic Party) has also attacked and killed Christians.

Afghanistan's constitution enshrines Islam as the state religion, permitting no law contrary to Islam. For any crimes that are not covered in Afghan legislation, the authorities will turn to sharia for guidance as to how to handle them.

In 2006, Abdul Rahman, a Christian convert, was charged with apostasy and sentenced to death. Following an international outcry, the Afghan

authorities declared him mentally unfit. This meant that, according to sharia he could not be held responsible for apostasy. In 2011, another convert to Christianity, was arrested but released after nine months because authorities said he had agreed to return to Islam.

Public opinion is vehemently anti-Christian. There have been calls in the national parliament for the death penalty for apostates to be enforced.

Although evidence of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic Christian heritage has largely been eradicated, a district of Herat is still called Injil ("Gospel"). Afghan soldiers destroyed the last church building in 1973, which had served foreign Christians.



Abdul Rahman

Pray that God will shield Afghanistan's believers and that they will have access to and be encouraged by Christian radio and internet ministries. Ask the Lord to provide for Christian refugees.



Algeria

Algeria is 99% Muslim with a small but growing Christian population, mainly converts from Islam and their children, estimated at up to 90,000. Many Algerian converts are Berbers, indigenous to North Africa, but are a minority in this Arab-majority country. A new constitution introduced in 2016, after a decade of bloody civil war against Islamists in the 1990s, declares Islam the state religion but adds that “freedom of creed and opinion is inviolable”. Conversion from Islam is not a criminal offence, but those who evangelise Muslims risk a five-year jail sentence. Freedom of worship is protected constitutionally, but other laws restrict its practice for non-Muslims.

According to the 2006 ordinance, the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship is in charge of granting permits for approving churches but, so far, no permits have been issued, despite repeated requests by Christian leaders. This leaves the churches legally vulnerable to closure. At least eleven churches have been shut by the authorities since the beginning of 2018.

Three closures were enforced on one day alone in October 2019, shortly after the Algerian Protestant Church Association (EPA) took the rare decision to hold a demonstration in protest outside provincial government offices in Bejaia. During the ensuing police action to seal the buildings, worshippers were forcibly evicted from the Full Gospel

Church in Tizi Ouzou city, pastored by the EPA’s president, leaving 1,000 Christians without a place to meet. Officials shut the 500-congregation Source of Life Church in Makouda, pastored by the EPA’s secretary, and closed the 100-member Light Church, in Tizi Ouzou.

Algeria experienced political upheaval in 2019 when 82-year-old President Abdelaziz Bouteflika resigned in April, after 20 years in office, raising concerns of a power-grab by Al Qaeda. After a series of postponed elections, Bouteflika’s successor, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, the former acting head of state, was elected in December 2019.



An official seal on a door of one of at least 11 churches closed in Algeria since early 2018 [Image credit: Middle East Concern]

Lift up Christians in Algeria and ask that they remain strong, despite setbacks. Pray that the authorities will reopen sealed churches and start the process of granting permits for church buildings.

Azerbaijan



An officially secular state, Azerbaijan is 96% Muslim (mainly Shia). The small Christian population (3%) includes a few thousand converts from Islam. The former community of Armenian Christians has been largely forced out by violence, and those who remain are secret believers.

Azerbaijan's constitution declares freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. In reality, religious activity within the country is tightly controlled by its 2009 Freedom of Religion Act.

The legislation requires religious groups to register, and each one must provide signatures of 50 members. However, the authorities seem to have enforced a policy of banning all registrations in the last five to seven years. According to figures from the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), there are only 14 legally functioning churches in a country of ten million people. The law also requires that all printed and published religious literature be assessed and labelled by SCWRA before it can be sold or distributed.

Local police forces harass, raid, detain and fine religious communities for alleged failures to comply with the legislation, although the number of raids decreased in 2019.

One raid was carried out after a head teacher called the police when a six-year-old boy took Christian booklets into

school as gifts. This led to the discovery by police that the boy's parents had held a Christian event for twelve children and given them a party gift of a book about the birth of Jesus. The couple were charged with possessing religious literature that did not bear a government "control mark" and holding a children's religious meeting in violation of the law. They were each fined 1,500 manats (\$1,410), which is more than three months' average wages for salaried work in Azerbaijan.



A church in Azerbaijan celebrating, in 2018, the anniversary of its registration. The church's application to register to make its activities legal had been rejected six times before success

Give thanks for the Christian community in Azerbaijan that is standing firm despite the obstacles placed in its path. Pray that the authorities will see Christians as a force for good in the country and relax the restrictions against their worship.



Bangladesh

The People's Republic of Bangladesh was formed in 1971, when mainly Bengali nationalist East Pakistan seceded from West Pakistan after a bloody civil war.

Bangladesh, a poor country prone to flooding and cyclones, is a secular state that has operated under a parliamentary democracy since military rule ended in 1990. Islam is the state religion, but the constitution allows minorities to practise and share their faith.

There has been a Christian presence since the sixteenth century when Portuguese trading posts were established in Satgon and Chittagong. The 1% Christian minority enjoys greater religious freedom than in many Muslim-majority countries but, along with the 9% Hindus, is subject to discrimination from the 90% Muslim majority.

Attempts to Islamise the country have been thwarted, but the struggle continues between Islamic and secular factions. In 2018, the government was criticised for going against the spirit of the constitution, which prohibits discrimination against any particular religion, when it launched a \$1.5 billion mosque-building programme.

Violence against Christians is increasing, particularly in rural areas. Some of those active in evangelism have been murdered. Converts from Islam especially face hostility.

From 2014, attacks by Islamist extremists have intensified. At the time

of writing, there are a few hundred Rohingya Christians living among three-quarters of a million Rohingya Muslims who fled genocide in Myanmar to refugee camps in Bangladesh. These Christians suffered extreme persecution in their homeland because of their ethnicity, and are now also being attacked because of their faith by extremist Muslim Rohingya in the camps.

Illegal land-grabs are common. In 2016, around 5,500 tribal Santal Christians were made homeless overnight when local Muslims and armed police evicted them from their land and set alight the wooden shacks they lived in. Three Christians were killed and many were injured.



Dijen was shot in the chest when armed police and local Muslims violently evicted the Santal Christians in 2016. Barnabas has built secure new brick and mortar homes for him and 99 other homeless Santal families

Ask the Lord to protect Bangladeshi Christians, especially converts, and encourage them to continue to share the Gospel.



Victims of Violence



“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you ...”
(Isaiah 41:10)

On 21 April 2019, Easter Sunday, suicide bombers attacked three worship services and three hotels where Christians who had completed all-night vigils were having Easter breakfast together. Over 200 people were killed and at least 500 were injured.

The threat of violence from extremists, hostile local communities and the authorities is a daily reality for persecuted Christians in many contexts, especially where national identity is closely identified with a majority religion other than Christianity.

West African Islamist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Cameroon, and Al Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, have killed hundreds of Christians and displaced thousands in 2019 alone. Islamist groups continue to be active in Syria and Iraq. Islamist attacks also occur in Pakistan, Tanzania, Bangladesh and Indonesia, among others. Christian gatherings in Sri Lanka can be violently disrupted by militant Buddhists and Hindu extremists in India frequently carry out acts of anti-Christian violence. Christians suffer repression and hostility in many Central Asian countries. North Korea remains the most dangerous country to be a Christian. China’s communist government is increasingly

oppressive towards Christians. Eritrea and Iran have laws that suppress freedom of religion for Christians, resulting in police raids, arrests, torture, and sometimes martyrdom.

Barnabas’ Victims of Violence Fund helps to rebuild shattered lives by providing food, medical care, legal assistance and places of refuge. When Christians need to make a fresh start, help with small-business start-up costs or vocational training makes this possible. The Fund also cares for the families of prisoners and helps Christians who have suffered state-sponsored injustice.



Barnabas Fund has provided emergency aid, and help to rebuild damaged and destroyed homes, for Christian survivors of Boko Haram violence in Cameroon

Lift up Christians living under the constant threat of violence or injustice simply because of their faith. Ask God to shield all who take refuge in Him (2 Samuel 22:31). Intercede for Christians recovering from violent attacks, that the Lord will bless them in their new beginnings and keep them safe. Praise God for those who endure injustice and imprisonment, and ask Him to strengthen them and their families.

Burkina Faso



Burkina Faso is majority-Muslim and around 30% Christian. The rise of extremist Islam, from 2015, has caused devastation, displaced thousands and destroyed agriculture. This, together with recurring drought and famine, has plunged the country into a humanitarian crisis.

Christians, who include many converts from Islam, suffer severe persecution. A spate of vicious militant attacks targeting Christians began in April 2019, and claimed at least 162 Christian lives by December. A church leader lamented, “Living or dying is of very little importance now. The most important thing is keeping faith in the Lord.”

The attacks began in the northern town of Silgadji on 28 April 2019 when a pastor, his son and four members of his congregation were shot in cold blood for refusing to convert to Islam. From April to June, at least another 56 Christians were slain.

In late September 2019, five separate attacks claimed 41 Christian lives and caused thousands to flee to Koungoussi, Bam Province, as jihadists warned, “Flee, convert or die”.

In October 2019, extremists slaughtered 36 Christians in Bam, Sanmatenga and Soum Provinces, in the north of the country.

In an attack on a church in Komondjari Province in the south-east on 1 December, five boys and nine

Christian men were shot dead during Sunday morning worship. A distraught church leader, related how extremists broke into the service, shouting “Allahu Akbar” before massacring all but one male in the congregation.

Landlocked, Burkina Faso, previously known as Upper Volta, was part of the French colonial empire in the Sahel region of Africa. It became independent in August 1960 and was re-named Burkina Faso in 1984.

The politically unstable country has experienced a number of military coups. With a mainly subsistence economy, Burkina Faso is one of poorest countries in Africa, despite its gold reserves. Two-fifths of the population are younger than 15 and life expectancy is low.



Christian women and children who survived an extremist attack on a church that killed 14 of the 15 males in the congregation

Pray for the protection of Christians facing Boko Haram attacks. Ask that the extremists will turn from violence and come to know the Prince of Peace. Pray Christians' faith will remain steadfast, the needs of the displaced will be met and the bereaved will know God's comfort.

Cameroon



Cameroon, formed of an amalgam of former French and British colonies, has a Christian population of around 70% with Muslims comprising 20%. Despite political tensions between the northern Francophone region and the smaller Anglophone region in the south-west, Cameroon has enjoyed relative stability since gaining independence in 1960.

Conflict between religious groups is rare. However, in the Far North, where the Muslim population is dominant, rural Christian communities are routinely subjected to Boko Haram violence. Attacks by the Nigerian Islamist group have increased in recent years, with gangs of up to 300 militants laying waste to Christian villages, devastating crops and killing livestock.

Eyewitness accounts of attacks describe heavily armed militants encircling Christian villages, shouting throughout the night as they kill, loot and burn. A local pastor said, “These attacks lead to great fear, psychosis, trauma and panic.”

In the last two months of 2019, at least ten Christians were murdered in a wave of Boko Haram attacks in the Far North. Seven were killed in Mayo Sava district. In Tourou, a 12-year-old Christian schoolboy was hacked to death when he resisted militants’ attempt to abduct him as a “child soldier”. In Moskota, church-founding Pastor David Mokoni and a hearing-impaired boy were killed in an attack

on their church. Boko Haram tend to murderously target men because they are usually the main breadwinners and protectors in communities.

The UN estimates that more than 170,000 Cameroonians, mainly Christians, have been forced to flee their homes. Others “hide out” in the hills, or travel to a town, for safety at night rather than stay in their beds.

Throughout the rainy season in 2019, communities were unable to farm because of relentless Boko Haram violence. A local pastor told Barnabas, “The lack of a harvest will cause long-term hardship for our Christian brothers and sisters.”



Boy returns to a burnt-out home in a Christian village attacked by Boko Haram in Far North Cameroon

Ask the Lord to strengthen
Cameroonian Christians
suffering severe persecution.

Pray that their attackers will turn from violence. Ask that displaced families will be safe in the towns they have fled to and the bereaved, especially widows and orphans, will be comforted.



Central African Republic

Christian communities in the Central African Republic (CAR) continue to be the target of violent attacks, despite a ceasefire between the government and 14 rival rebel groups that was signed in Rome in June 2017.

Islamist armed groups such as the Seleka and Fulani militias have attacked Christian communities and their leaders, and burned down churches. They have also destroyed Christian homes, killed many, and forced thousands to flee. Christians face regular threats of violence and kidnapping from militant Muslim Fulani herdsmen.

In 2019, two pastors were shot dead by Muslim militants while travelling in their car on Christmas Day. In November 2018, at least 40 Christians were killed, a church burnt and 20,000 fled when extremists attacked a Christian mission in Seleka stronghold, Alindao. In May 2018, Christians were forced to flee their neighbourhood when armed Muslim groups rampaged through the capital burning homes and killing at least 15, including the pastor, in an attack on a church.

The UN declared it “highly worrying” that attacks on Christians have continued, despite the presence of the UN’s own peacekeeping force (MINUSCA).

The CAR is a majority Christian country. Most of the 15% Muslim population are in the north-eastern part of the country bordering Chad

and Sudan. The Seleka are a powerful force which, under their leader Michel Djotodia, overthrew the CAR government and held power from 2013–2014. The regime committed many abuses including pillage, execution-style murders, rape and torture.

Despite the 2017 ceasefire agreement, and the continued presence of UN and other peacekeeping forces, the country remains susceptible to outbreaks of violence. This is mostly between the Seleka and the “anti-balaka” militia – who misleadingly call themselves Christians, despite their actions being condemned by church leaders.



Christian communities continue to be targets in the violence that has wracked CAR since Seleka military forces held political power in 2013-2014

Pray that the parties to the ceasefire will keep to their agreements and reject violence. Ask God to protect Christians and all innocent civilians, especially church leaders who are a particular target of the Islamist militants. Pray that Christians will be filled with peace as they respond to their suffering in a Christ-like way.



Chad



Chad, a large landlocked country in the heart of the Sahel region of Africa, is scarred by civil war and corruption. Jihadi activity has increased regionally in recent years and, in June 2019, the UN warned that the Sahel countries were entering a humanitarian crisis due to surging extremist violence, forced displacement, drought and famine.

The Christian population (around 35%) in this Muslim-majority nation faces increasing pressures from officials as well as violence from the Islamist group Boko Haram and militant Fulani herdsman. Since 2009, Boko Haram has violently attacked Christian farming communities in the Lake Chad area. The region has become the epicentre of one of the world's most complex humanitarian disasters.

Societal divisions over land in the south, where most Christians live, are worsening and leading to outbreaks of violence. Farms and churches have been destroyed and herds stolen or killed, causing many Christians to flee for their lives. In March 2019, violent conflicts erupted in the Tandjilé Region, with many deaths, villages torched and markets closed.

Constitutionally, Islam is prioritised and most government workers and military personnel are Muslim. Discrimination occurs in the context of *diya* (“blood money”) i.e. compensation for injury or damage under sharia (Islamic law). This is payable to the

victim, their family or their community. *Diya* is unconstitutional in Chad, yet widely followed, unregulated, and open to abuse. According to sharia, non-Muslims are granted less compensation than Muslims for the same injury.

Christians also face persecution from followers of traditional African religions. Animists account for around one-fifth of the population. In 2018, a “Yondo” initiation year, hundreds of young Christian men and boys fled from their villages to avoid being abducted to undergo brutal, and sometimes fatal, initiation rites.



Christian women living in the Lake Chad area receiving food aid from Barnabas

Pray that the persecution of Christians will end and Boko Haram's plans to terrorise, kill and destroy will fail. Ask God to protect Christians from attacks and send His Holy Spirit to comfort the bereaved.



China



The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) introduced stringent new regulations in February 2020 giving it control over almost every aspect of religious life. The measures state religious organisations must submit to the leadership of the CCP and spread its “socialist policies”.

Since 2018, there has been an intensification of government action against unofficial congregations, known as “house churches”, and state-regulated “three-self” churches in China, a country where Christians are thought to number at least 150 million – a figure that is growing at a rate of 1.2 million a year. The intensity of the persecution varies across the vast country, but many house churches have been shut, and members arrested and imprisoned. Authorities have removed crosses from churches and barred children from attending worship.

In 2018, the scrutiny of religious literature and websites was tightened, and online Bible sales banned. At the same time, the government announced a plan to “sinicise” (make Chinese) Christianity and interpret Scriptures according to secular socialist views. In March 2019, all churches in Luoyang county, Henan province were ordered to replace the Ten Commandments with quotes of President Xi Jinping and, in Jiangxi province, Biblical paintings in some churches were replaced with portraits of the president.

House churches responded to the tightening of regulations by launching in September 2018 a declaration calling on the authorities to allow full religious freedom in China. Within two months, it had been signed by at least 500 pastors.

The Chinese government is rolling out an artificial intelligence (AI) surveillance system across the country using advanced facial recognition to track the movements of its citizens. In Beijing and Shanghai, pilot schemes of “social scoring” watch for “dissent” from prescribed communist doctrines in people’s visible behaviour or online activities. The authorities have already used technological advances against minority Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, and Christians can expect the technology will be turned against them.



A portrait of China’s President Xi Jinping has replaced Biblical paintings in a church in Jiangxi [Image: Bitter Winter]

Pray for courage and resilience for Christians in China that they may stand steadfast in their faith against the challenges facing them. Ask that the Lord is their rock and their refuge.



Egypt

Islamic State (IS) attacks slowed in Muslim-majority Egypt in 2019, compared to the previous two years when terrible IS atrocities included suicide bombings at two churches on Palm Sunday 2017 that claimed at least 46 lives. But terrorism is still a threat to Christian targets. Despite a counterinsurgency campaign by security forces, IS remains active in northern Sinai where terrorists have threatened to kill all Christians. In February 2019, Islamic terrorists abducted a Christian passenger from a bus travelling to the north Sinai city of El Arish – where IS murdered seven Christians in 2017. He has not been seen since.

President al-Sisi, who has condemned attacks on Christians in the past, has continued to speak supportively about the Egyptian Christian community. On 6 January 2019, he attended the inauguration of Egypt's largest cathedral and expressed his support for Christians, "We are one and no one will ever drive a wedge between us." Only one day earlier, an Egyptian security officer was killed while attempting to make safe a bomb placed near a church in Cairo.

Al-Sisi's government has continued to legalise churches and church-affiliated buildings, following its repeal of Ottoman-era restrictions in September 2016. The licensing process remains slow, despite calls by successive prime ministers for the process to be expedited. In December 2019, the

number of churches licensed stood at only 1,322, out of 3,730 churches that applied for approval. A number of churches were already licensed before the law was introduced.

Despite the government's softer stance, Christian communities regularly face pressure and hostility. Newly-registered churches are often targeted by Muslim mobs who still resent Christian places of worship and use the status change as a pretext for violence.

Christianity is deeply embedded in Egypt's history, dating back to the first century AD. Despite the later arrival of Islam and centuries of persecution, Christians number about 10% of the population.



The number of churches granted licences in Egypt rose steadily throughout 2019

Give thanks for President al-Sisi's support of Christians and ask that Muslim communities will heed his call for tolerance. Pray that the church licensing work will speed up allowing Christians to worship legally. Ask God to protect Christians from terrorist violence.



Children



“Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’”

(Matthew 19:14)

On 30 August 2017, Sharoon Masih, a Pakistani Christian schoolboy, was beaten to death by his Muslim classmates. Such extreme violence is thankfully rare, but for minority Christian children in countries around the world, school is a place where they face hostility and probably pressure to convert to the majority religion. This comes not just from other children, but also from teachers. Christian students can also be marked down or failed in exams. Many other Christian children come from families who are too poor to afford to send them to school at all, often because parents are trapped in poverty due to anti-Christian discrimination, while those who are refugees fleeing persecution, famine or conflict simply have no school to go to.

War deprives children of more than just their education. Many are robbed of their childhoods too. Barnabas Fund has helped provide trauma counselling for Syrian Christian children, distressed by the horrors they have seen and experienced in the years of war and persecution.

In China and Tajikistan, authorities have banned children from attending Sunday school; the laws apply even

if children are accompanied by their parents. Such restrictions make it harder for children to grow up in the Christian faith. In Pakistan and Egypt, Christian girls may be abducted and raped, compelled to convert to Islam and forced into marriage with a Muslim – often their abductor.



Akash is delighted he can now attend a Christian school. At his old school he was very frightened and the Muslim children would not even eat or drink with him. Barnabas supports 124 Christian schools in Pakistan, educating over 11,000 Christian children

Pray for the children of persecuted Christian families around the world. Ask the Lord to be their Protector and their Comforter in the face of danger. Pray that children will be enabled to break free from the cycle of poverty and illiteracy in a safe and nurturing learning environment. Pray that the Lord will lighten the path of persecuted children to grow up to be strong in their faith.



Please contact your local Barnabas Fund office for details on how to sponsor a Christian child.

Eritrea



Eritrea remains one of the worst countries in the world for Christian persecution. At the time of writing, hundreds of Christians are detained in the north-east African country's notorious jails. Imprisoned Christians are tortured, starved and forced into hard labour. Conditions are worse for pastors and theological students who are singled out for beatings or have their jail terms extended as a warning to others.

Many Christians are held indefinitely, sometimes without trial, not knowing when they will be released. Among them is Twen, a Christian arrested in 2005 at the age of 22 at a New Year's night vigil with Christian friends. She has been beaten and tortured in jail, even taking punishment for a sick fellow-prisoner. Twen was offered her freedom, if she recanted her faith. But she refused.

A new series of arbitrary arrests took place in 2019, with 332 Christians rounded up. Of these, 141 – including 104 women and 14 children – were detained at a house church meeting in the capital, Asmara, in May. In a raid on 23 June, pregnant women were among 70 Christians arrested at an unregistered church in Keren city.

Only three Christian denominations – Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran – as well as Sunni Islam (half the population are Muslim) are legally permitted by Eritrea's Marxist government, but official status does not guarantee freedom from intimidation.

During 2019, authorities shut down 21 health centres run by a registered church denomination and ordered the closure of seven Christian schools.

Hundreds of Christians have fled Eritrea. Latest figures put the number of Christian families sheltering in camps in Ethiopia, Sudan and Uganda at 2,750, while some 30,000 are in Israel. An Eritrean Christian said, "The country is becoming worse and worse. Many people have left ... many are thinking of leaving. Our families are in deep suffering."



Sophia fled Eritrea and now lives in Australia. She vividly recalls the terror she felt as an eight-year-old when she and her friends at Bible class were rounded up by police. After their release, Sophia's family lived in constant fear

Ask the Lord to strengthen Christians in Eritrea so they know that neither hardship nor persecution can separate them from the love of Jesus Christ. Pray that the hearts of the authorities will soften to allow believers to worship freely. Ask that Christians who have fled will find safe havens.



India

The secular nation of India has an 80% Hindu majority and a 4% Christian minority. Hinduism is strongly connected to Indian identity and extreme Hindu nationalism under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is growing.

Persecution has worsened since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014. Religious extremists and militant groups target Christians and intensifying violence has occurred in several of the more stable states where persecution was less prevalent in the past. The police response to anti-Christian violence is often dismissive.

In December 2019, there were violent protests when Modi proposed a Citizenship Amendment Bill, which excludes Muslim immigrants from nearby Muslim-majority countries from gaining Indian citizenship, but allows it for non-Muslim minorities from those countries. Christians feared that it could provoke “hate crimes” against them by Muslims.

Since 1978, Freedom of Religion laws were introduced in several states. Despite their name, these are in effect anti-conversion laws banning the use of force, fraud or allurement in conversion. Their vague terms make Christians actively sharing their faith vulnerable to false accusation. Modi’s government supports the laws being rolled out nationally.

In August 2019, Himachal Pradesh state approved a stricter new Freedom of Religion Bill with jail sentences of up

to five years for forced conversions, and up to seven for the conversion of women, minors and Dalits. Anyone converting must now state a month in advance that they are freely doing so.

In November 2019, the Supreme Court bailed the remaining five of seven Christians wrongfully convicted of killing a nationalist leader in 2008. The killing sparked horrific anti-Christian violence in Orissa (formerly Odisha) state taking 90 lives, injuring thousands, leaving 56,000 homeless and destroying nearly 300 church buildings.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for Christian organisations to receive financial donations. Christian and Muslim Dalits suffer more discrimination than Indian-origin Dalits and are excluded from the Dalit education and employment quotas.



Indian Christians with a well supplied by Barnabas Fund

Ask God to protect Indian Christians against discrimination and violence. Pray that rising Hindu extremism will be quelled and that political leaders will pursue peace rather than division.

Indonesia

Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, took steps in 2019 to combat the rise in recent years of hard-line Islamic ideology. In many parts of the sprawling south-east Asian archipelago Christians, comprising more than 15% of the population, face discrimination and violence. Only a generation ago, Muslims and Christians lived peaceably as equals in accordance with the state-promoted philosophy "Pancasila".

In November 2019, authorities launched a website for members of the public to report posts by civil servants containing elements of "hate, misleading information, intolerance or anti-Indonesian sentiment". A survey revealed that 19% of civil servants, 18% of private employees and 3% of military personnel favour establishing an Islamic state i.e. ruled by sharia (Islamic law).

The Ministry of Religious Affairs also announced in 2019 that it would replace 167 school textbooks considered to contain radical or intolerant material in order to "make students more tolerant".

In June 2019, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (previously called "Ahok"), the Christian former governor of Jakarta, the Indonesian capital, was released early from a two-year jail term for blasphemy.

Another groundbreaking development in 2019 was the decision of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) – the Indonesian political party and claiming to be the world's largest moderate Muslim movement – to break with

classical Islamic teaching by abolishing the legal category of "infidel" (*kafir*) for non-Muslims.

The threat from Islamist extremism, pressure from authorities and hostility from the Muslim community varies greatly in intensity across the country. In May 2018, a family of Islamic State suicide bombers targeted morning worship at three churches in Surabaya, on the island of Java, killing 13 people.

Pastors report that churches are increasingly being closed. In August 2019, police forcibly shut a church building in Sumatra and even stopped the congregation from continuing to worship in a tent.



The entrance to one of three churches targeted by Islamic bombers on the island of Java in May 2018

Give thanks that the Indonesian authorities and the NU have taken action to combat the advance of Islamic extremism. Pray that this will encourage the Muslim majority to live in harmony with their Christian neighbours, treating them equally.

Iran

One of the Iranian president's senior legal advisers questioned the decision by the authorities to forcibly remove a cross from the top of a 100-year-old Assyrian church in Tabriz in May 2019. He pointed out that the constitution officially recognises Christianity (as well as Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism) and states that religious minorities are free to perform religious ceremonies. In July 2019, the authorities restored the cross although the church keys were not returned immediately.

Iran, a majority Shia Muslim country and Islamic Republic since 1979, is led by Islamic cleric, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as Supreme Leader, who appoints key judicial and military posts. Hassan Rouhani was re-elected president in 2017. Though described as a “moderate”, persecution of Christians has increased since he came to power in 2013. There are at least 350,000 Muslim-background Christians inside Iran and huge numbers in the Iranian diaspora.

Historic Assyrian and Armenian Christian minorities, whose languages are not understood by the majority Muslim population including most Muslim youth, are permitted to worship in their own language. Although, it seems that historical evidence of Iran's Christian past is being gradually destroyed through the destruction of Christian cemeteries. All Farsi-speaking churches have been

closed, with converts from Islam, and their house churches, the main target of harassment and persecution.

Muslim-background Christians are often charged with “acting against national security” and given long prison sentences. The government seems to have a strategy of getting new converts to leave the country voluntarily, by arresting them and releasing them again soon afterwards, sometimes even openly suggesting that the converts leave. Because so many do leave, it means that most leaders of convert groups have little theological and Biblical education.



The Assyrian Evangelical Church in Tabriz, left, after the authorities tore down its cross, and with its cross restored, right

Ask that young leaders of convert groups will be equipped by the Lord to disciple and nurture even newer converts toward a firm grounding in their faith. Pray for courage and protection for imprisoned Christians and give thanks for those who continue to turn to Christ despite persecution.



Iraq

“It was not just Daesh [Islamic State, IS] who destroyed our homes, it was also our neighbours, the ones we considered our friends ... How can we possibly live somewhere we don’t feel welcome or safe?” said an 80-year-old Christian, living in a Christian displaced people’s camp in Erbil, northern Iraq (Kurdistan).

The conquest of Mosul and the Plains of Nineveh (the historic centre of Iraqi Christianity) by IS in 2014 caused huge numbers to flee. Christians who remain face an uncertain future, in a country led by a fragmented Shia government, not supported by many minority Sunnis.

Even though Mosul and the surrounding towns were “liberated” from Islamic State (IS), many Christians remained wary of returning because of the threat of further persecution. A Muslim resident of Mosul said, “If I was a Christian, I wouldn’t go back.” His home was occupied by victorious Iraqi security forces and he recalled, “neighbours told us to take the house of a Christian who lived four doors down.” Christians’ homes have been occupied, destroyed and in some cases fraudulently sold, as has happened to Christian properties in Baghdad – many families who fled to other countries or became displaced within Iraq had nowhere to return to. Even government officials have admitted that the brief IS occupation

has created an ongoing “culture of hate” amongst Muslims towards Christians.

It is estimated that around 75% of Iraq’s Christian population (around 1.5 million believers in 1990) have left the country due to anti-Christian hostility and violence which began after the 1990-91 Gulf War and intensified after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003. Such violence included murders, kidnappings and attacks on church buildings and Christian-owned businesses.



Iraqi refugee family who were forced to flee from their homes

Ask the Lord to protect and strengthen Iraqi Christians who now feel unsafe in their homeland. Pray that God will guide those who are displaced as to where to settle down. Pray that their community and the Iraqi government will enable a Christian heartland to be re-established in Iraq.



Kazakhstan



Kazakhstan is undergoing a process of “soft Islamisation”. Radical Muslims have taken control of most of the small businesses, and Islamic money – mainly from Turkey – is funding most of the educational institutions.

Christians comprise about 25% of the population of this vast Central Asian republic. Many Christians are from a Russian background, but some are ethnic Kazakhs who have converted from Islam. Protestant Christians, especially those from a Muslim background, are viewed with great distrust.

Kazakhstan’s secular constitution guarantees freedom of religion. From independence in 1995 until 2010, the situation for Christians, other than former Muslims, was relatively easy. However, a draconian Religion Law passed in 2011, designed to prevent extremism, has greatly increased restrictions on religious freedom. The law prohibits evangelising and bans religious organisations from receiving foreign donations.

The Religion Law also requires that religious groups must have at least 50 members locally, 500 regionally and 5,000 nationally in order to register – an impossibility for smaller churches.

In 2017, a government committee reviewed issues including “destructive” religious movements, the protection of children and respecting individuals’ religious beliefs; it then proposed a raft of 61 amendments imposing even

harsher restrictions. The government ignored Christians’ suggestions to revise them and approved all the amendments in 2018, including a ban on religious teaching unless within a registered organisation – effectively making religious discussions in private homes illegal.

Unregistered churches are raided by police who seize property and arrest Christians. Some are fined or imprisoned for “worshipping illegally”. In February 2019, two unregistered churches in Taraz were raided by police on successive Sundays and heavy fines were imposed on church members.



Barnabas built a church-run residence for Muslim-background Kazakh converts facing rejection by their communities and is helping them toward self-sufficiency by supporting a wolfhound breeding business

Pray that the Church in Kazakhstan will be given courage to continue to spread the Gospel.



Ask that those suffering persecution from the authorities will remain steadfast.

Pray that political leaders will be inclined to listen to Christians’ requests and that the rollout of restrictions on religious freedoms will be reversed.

Refugees and Internally Displaced People



“The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”
(Deuteronomy 33:27)

Many Christians have to flee from persecution or anti-Christian violence, sometimes escaping with nothing but their lives.

Boko Haram attacks have caused hundreds of thousands of Christians take refuge in IDP (internally displaced people) camps in Nigeria. In Far North Cameroon, thousands of Christians are being displaced from rural villages by ongoing, ruthless Boko Haram attacks. Many have fled to save their lives, leaving behind their livelihoods and all their possessions.

Hundreds of thousands of Syrian and Iraqi Christians have fled from genocidal violence at the hands of Islamic State and other Islamist militant groups. They cannot return home because of hostility from their neighbours and they dare not live in normal refugee or IDP camps for fear of further persecution by Muslims living in the camps. In Myanmar, mainly Christian villages are often attacked by the army and all the inhabitants must flee or be killed.

Western governments and the UN generally refuse to recognise the particular suffering of Christians or to grant them asylum on that basis.

Barnabas' Refugees Fund gives practical help to thousands of Christian IDPs and refugees.



Distraught Gabriel, a Christian from Burkina Faso, was separated from his wife and young children when they all fled from a Boko Haram attack on their village. When he eventually found them, a week later, Barnabas was providing for their practical needs. “You gave us clothes, shelter and food,” said Gabriel, with tears in his eyes. “Christians we don’t know are sending us help. This is strengthening our faith and giving us the sense of the real body of Christ. Wherever they are, may the Lord bless them and rescue them in difficult times as they did for us.”

Lift up in prayer all Christian refugees and those displaced within their own country. Pray that God will be their refuge and a strong tower (Psalm 61:3). Ask Him to watch over all dispossessed Christians, that they will know His comfort and peace and be assured by Him of their heavenly homeland, where the Lord has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:16).



Kenya



The extremist Islamist group Al Shabaab have openly declared Kenyan Christians an enemy to be subjugated, converted or eradicated. When Christian-majority Kenya joined with Somalia in fighting Al Shabaab in 2011, Al Shabaab declared they would attack on Kenyan soil. Islamic State (IS) encouraged this stating, “May Allah hasten the conquest of Kenya for the Soldiers of the Khilafah [Caliphate] in Somalia”.

In December 2019, Al Shabaab killed eight Christians and three other non-Muslims in a bus attack. Between 2014 and 2019, there have been numerous bus attacks claiming over 38 lives. Christian passengers are typically singled out and shot if they refuse to renounce their Christian faith or recite the Islamic creed, which Muslims consider conversion to Islam. Al Shabaab attacks in north-east Kenya have also targeted Christians in towns, villages and at work.

In 2017, Al Shabaab beheaded 13 Christians in two horrific attacks. In a notorious attack in 2015, 148 Christian students were massacred at Garissa University. Militant Muslims, assisted by Al Shabaab, freed Muslim students but singled out Christian students for bloody, execution-style slaughter.

Kenya is over 80% Christian and around 12% Muslim. The coastal regions are predominantly Muslim due to their Arab roots, but there is also a strong Muslim presence in the north-east of Kenya and Christians

living there are vulnerable. The violent, radical Islamic group the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC) is based in Mombasa and active in the coastal regions. The MYC, also known as al-Hijra, has links to both Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab.

In 2016, Kenya introduced strict new regulations for religious societies, including the requirement for church leaders to have a theology certificate from a certified institution. Some leaders raised concerns that the rules seemed to be aimed at restricting the Church in Kenya.



Kenyan Christians are frequently targeted by Al Shabaab

Pray that violence against Kenyan Christians will end. Ask the Lord to protect Christians in Muslim-majority areas, especially students and travellers. Pray that religious freedoms and equality before the law will be maintained for all Kenyans.



Kyrgyzstan

The population of Kyrgyzstan is 86% Muslim (mainly Sunnis). Kyrgyzstan was the most relaxed towards Christians out of all the Central Asian countries after independence in 1991. However, it became overnight one of the strictest when it passed a new Religion Law in 2009. There has also been a revival of Islamic practices since the country gained independence.

Proposed amendments to tighten up the already constricting 2009 Religion Law include banning the sharing of beliefs in public and censoring all religious literature.

The law means Christians can be fined for unregistered religious activity, but simultaneously makes it difficult for them to register. Therefore, many Christians are acting illegally whenever they gather for worship. However, in the two years to September 2019, 80 churches were granted registration.

Christians converts from Islam face harassment and persecution from family and the community, especially in rural areas. Eldos, a Christian convert, fled Kyrgyzstan in 2018 after suffering terrible violence from local Muslims, when he refused to return to Islam. He was threatened and held captive for ten hours in a prosecutor's office in an attempt to force him to drop the charges against his attackers.

Converts find it hard to get work because Islamists own many businesses. They employ only Muslims and require

staff to obey their employers regarding religious practice. Emigration is affecting the economy and the church, as church leaders leave the country in search of work.

Traditionally school friendships last a lifetime, but Christian children are encountering hostility and even violence at school. Boys and girls are beaten and stoned by others, encouraged by the mullahs.

In Kyrgyz culture there is great concern about what happens to the body after death; converts fear being given Muslim funerals because there is only one cemetery for Christians in the whole country.



Christian converts from Islam attend a Barnabas supported training seminar

Pray for protection for Christian converts in Kyrgyzstan. Ask that Christian leaders will stand firm in the face of persecution. Lift up the many Christians who cannot get work to support their families unless they deny Christ. Ask that they remain faithful and that our heavenly Father will provide for them.



Laos

Laos' approximately 150,000 Christians are targeted both at a local level and by the government. Locally, they are subjected to harassment and violence, while the communist government imposes tight restrictions on religious activity.

In 2016, the government introduced new laws governing religious practice. Under the new legislation, religious organisations continue to be required to register with the government. Churches have to get approval to conduct services and to import printed or electronic literature. The laws also require them to refrain from disturbing the “social order” or “national harmony.”

While Buddhists enjoy comparative religious freedom in some parts of the country, local officials are typically highly suspicious of Christians, partly because of a perceived connection with the West.

On 29 December 2018, police raided a Christmas church service in the southern province of Savannakhet and arrested seven Christians, including three church leaders, who were charged with an “illegal gathering” and detained them for five days. The church was also vandalised.

Some believers from the Hmong ethnic minority have been evicted from their farmland and homes for refusing to renounce their faith. Christians from ethnic minorities have also been denied access to medical care and education.

Christians imprisoned for their faith, especially pastors and evangelists, are sometimes tortured. Congregations that are not able to complete the onerous registration requirements can find it very hard to meet, as local authorities have been known to ban house churches. Authorities have also confiscated Bibles from Christians, even from those belonging to registered congregations.

Laos is one of the poorest countries in south-east Asia. Around 80% of the seven million population, which is mainly Buddhist, work in agriculture.



A Christian home in Laos. Christians in rural areas are particularly subject to persecution by local authorities

Pray for believers in Laos that, despite harassment, violence and the threat of imprisonment, they will continue to share the Gospel of Christ, knowing that the LORD is on their side (Psalm 118:6). Pray that restrictions requiring churches to register will be lifted and that Christians will be able to freely access Scripture.



Libya



Libya's interim constitution (2011) declares Islam the state religion and uses sharia as the principal source of legislation, but claims to guarantee non-Muslims the freedom to practise their religion and prohibits religious discrimination. The UN-backed Government of National Accord's (GNA) policies contradict these claims. The government seems to be either unwilling or powerless to investigate crimes against religious minorities.

The Christian presence is mainly comprised of foreign migrant workers and refugees, but there are also a small number of indigenous Libyan converts. Islamists target Christians for killing, kidnap, forceful conversion, and sale in what the UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM) calls "modern-day slave markets". Most of the refugees hail from West African countries or from Eritrea, attempting to reach Europe via Libya.

Violence against Christian detainees, including sexual assaults, is commonplace. In December 2018, a mass grave containing the bodies of 34 Ethiopian Christians martyred in 2015 by Islamic State (IS) was discovered. After being ousted from the northern coastal city of Sirte in 2016, IS moved into the deserts of southern Libya.

The country has been beset by chaos and civil war since Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in 2011, with two major factions claiming legitimacy.

Parliament, based in Tobruk, has refused to recognise the GNA and the powerful Libyan National Army (LNA) only recognises the authority of the parliament. An estimated 2,000 militant Islamist groups, including IS, have filled the power vacuum and built a strong presence in the country.

Late in 2019, Turkish and Syrian militias were deployed to support the GNA. A ceasefire was agreed during peace negotiations in Germany on 16 January 2020. A few days later, countries with an interest in Libya, including Russia, France and Turkey, agreed to an arms embargo provided the ceasefire holds.



The bodies of the 20 Egyptian Christians, martyred in 2015 by Islamic State in Libya, were flown back to Cairo on 14 May 2018. A Ghanaian Christian was also murdered with them

Ask for the protection of Christians in Libya, especially converts from Islam. Pray that the ceasefire will hold, bringing lasting peace, justice and stability. Pray for an end to the modern-day slavery of migrants and ask that they will not lose heart as they fix their eyes on God.



Morocco

Change is taking place slowly in Morocco, which is 99% Muslim. King Mohammed VI, who claims direct descent from Muhammad, is active in “interfaith” dialogue. However, indigenous Moroccan Christian converts from Islam can still only meet secretly in small groups in their homes. Church buildings, many from the French colonial era, may only be attended by Christian immigrants, who mainly come from sub-Saharan Africa.

Islam remains the religion of the state under Morocco’s reforming constitution, adopted in 2011 in the wake of the “Arab Spring” protests, which guarantees all citizens freedom to practise their religion. Identity cards no longer record a person’s faith. The constitution only recognises the religions of Sunni Islam and Judaism. Voluntary conversion from Islam, while stigmatised, is not illegal, but “enticing” conversion or proselytising – so called “shaking the faith of a Muslim” – is punishable by up to three years in prison. Foreign missionaries caught evangelising are expelled.

Only God knows how many indigenous Christian converts there are in Morocco. Estimates vary from 3,000 up to 50,000. Christian converts, who are mainly ethnic Berbers, face social, family and cultural pressures. The authorities ignore such Christians as long as they remain “invisible” and keep their gatherings discreet. Radio,

television and now the internet all contribute to making Christianity more accessible. The New Testament has been translated into Moroccan Arabic and the Old Testament translation is scheduled to be completed by 2021.

The National Coalition for Moroccan Christians is continuing to press for more religious freedoms, including the right of all Moroccans to choose their faith, freedom of worship, official recognition of churches, the right to have Christian cemeteries and the right to give children Christian names.



Morocco was once a major centre of Christianity but was Islamised after the Muslim conquest of North Africa in 670 AD, which brought Arab rule

Give thanks for the measure of freedom allowed to Christians in Morocco. Pray that the community of invisible Christians will be recognised by the government, allowed to worship freely and to share their faith with others.



Myanmar

Because I am Christian, they made me imitate Jesus on a cross like the crucifixion,” said one Christian describing his treatment by the Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw).

In 87% Buddhist Myanmar (Burma), ethnic Burman identity is tied to Buddhism. Christianity is portrayed as a foreign religion, although there have been Christians in the country since the late 1700s. Most Christians are from non-Burman ethnic minorities including the Chin, Karen and Kachin.

Ethnic minority Christian communities are offered free education at Buddhist schools, but all pupils must study and also practise Buddhism. Those who officially convert will have their national identity cards amended to their new religion and be guaranteed a government job, which are only open to Buddhists.

For decades, the military-controlled government has brutally oppressed Christian and Muslim ethnic minority groups. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced, mainly by aerial bombardment. Tens of thousands of Christian survivors are living in IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps.

In 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) party swept to power in the first openly contested elections for 25 years. But internal oppression has continued. An intense upsurge of attacks in predominantly Christian Kachin State

came in 2018, causing at least 10,000 Kachin Christians to flee for their lives.

Myanmar’s military campaign against its own citizens was condemned by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in September 2018. The “persecutory intent” and use of “ethnic cleansing” tactics by the Army against the Kachin were described in a UNHRC report that included many testimonies of torture, rape and other abuses by military personnel.

Violation of the 1948 Genocide Convention by the Myanmar government is the subject of an International Court of Justice case in The Hague that opened in December 2019.



Eight of “Joanna’s” nine children have died. Barnabas provided aid for many hundreds of displaced Christians living in IDP camps

Lift up Kachin, Chin, Karen and Naga Christians in Myanmar, and other brutally persecuted minorities. Pray they will be given strength to endure hardship in IDP camps and all who have lost loved ones, some entire families, will be comforted. Ask that military and complicit government leaders will turn in horror from their atrocities.



Pastors and Evangelists



“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation ...”
(Isaiah 52:7)

Around the world, there are many full-time Christian workers faithfully carrying out God’s call on their lives to share the Gospel and build up the Body of Christ in their own countries or their own people-groups. Living at a very simple and basic level, in places where they face hostility from the community and from the authorities, their ministry can be lonely, under-resourced and dangerous. Many are from churches whose members are too poor to be able to adequately support the full-time workers, even if all are giving generously.

Christian leaders are often selected as targets by those who violently attack God’s people, so their lives are in greater danger than other Christians. Governmental authorities seeking to weaken the Church also tend to focus their harassment on Christians in leadership roles. In Iran, for example, ordinary converts from Islam will be arrested and detained for just a couple of days. But those who are active in evangelistic outreach or in leading house churches will be detained for longer periods, some of them for many years.

Those who lead churches and disciple believers in Muslim-majority

communities often provide a lifeline of encouragement to completely isolated Christians. Barnabas is supporting Yohanes and his wife Pujjati who are church-planting in Indonesia. They have started ten congregations in the last ten years. When Islamists forced their church building to close, they refused to give up and renovated another building for the new believers.



Yohanes and Pujjati, with their twins Ricco and Sicco, are amongst the many Indonesian church-planters supported by Barnabas Fund

Give thanks to God for pastors, church-planters and evangelists who serve Him in the face of opposition and violence. Ask the Holy Spirit to equip and empower them for ministry and provide for their practical needs. Ask for them to be protected from attacks from the majority community, harassment from the authorities and unjust penalties for their service to God. Pray for fruitful ministries, with lives transformed by the Gospel of Christ and churches strengthened to face persecution with courage and perseverance.



Nepal

The Church is rapidly growing in the former Hindu kingdom of Nepal. In the early 1950s there were virtually no Christians in the Himalayan country, but today it is estimated there could be as many as 1.5 million believers, or about 5% of the population, 85% of which is Hindu.

Although an officially secular nation since 2008, a new law that came into force in 2018 made it a criminal offence to attempt to convert a follower of a religion “being practiced since ancient times”. This refers to a Sanatana religion, interpreted as one passed down through at least three generations. Hinduism and Buddhism were included, but most Nepali Christians, who are either first- or second-generation believers, were excluded. If convicted, Christians could face a prison sentence of up to five years and a 50,000 rupees (\$670) fine. In effect, Christians can no longer evangelise or publically state what they believe without risk.

The new law also bans “hurting religious sentiment”, a wording so vague that it makes almost any public Christian activity potentially “illegal”, effectively legally gagging Christians.

The number of arrests of Christians is rising. In November 2018, four Christians were secretly followed and filmed near Kathmandu before being arrested for breaking anti-conversion laws. It was alleged they had been “proselytising” door-to-door, “targeting Dalits” (considered

“untouchable” by high-caste Hindus).

In April 2019, four Christians involved in running training courses for pastors at a church in Dang district, mid-western Nepal, were arrested for trying to “lure conversions”. Police claimed that cash and a nebuliser, a device that aids breathing, found in their hotel room proved they were using “enticements”. After a court hearing in Nepal, the four accused – two Nepali men, an Indian national and a US woman – were released, in a victory celebrated by local Christians.



One of the Barnabas-sponsored Bible study classes in Nepal that led to the training of 213 tutors and helped to train 6,094 students in the year up to July 2019

Lift up the Nepali Church that is growing in spite of opposition. Pray that pastors and other Christians will have wisdom and boldness in sharing God’s Word. Ask that Christians will stand firm in their faith, knowing that the Lord is an ever-present help in times of trouble.

Nigeria



For Christians living in the Middle Belt and North of Nigeria persecution is rife and life precarious. Christian communities are targeted in deadly “religious cleansing” assaults by jihadi Boko Haram, and “your land or your blood” attacks by armed militant Fulani herdsmen.

From 2018, extremist violence has escalated and it is estimated that over 1,000 Christians were killed in 2019 alone. Thousands of others have been maimed, burned and kidnapped or forced to flee to refugee camps. “Persecution is real here. We are targeted because of our faith,” said one distraught Christian leader in Borno State.

Since 2015, a surge of extremist violence has killed more than 6,000 Christians and displaced almost two million. “I saw my brother-in-law’s body on the ground, hacked to pieces by a machete. Our home was destroyed. The hospital was burnt. They tried to burn the roof of the church by piling up the chairs, like a bonfire,” said one distressed Christian.

A Christian leader in Bauchi State identified extremist groups as Boko Haram, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Maitatsine, the Kala Kato and Fulani militants. All are heavily armed and even target villages by helicopter.

Boko Haram are aiming to establish an Islamic caliphate in the north-east and seem to be seeking to “cleanse” their territory of any Christian presence.

In August 2016, they declared they would “blow up every church and kill all citizens of the cross”. The carnage has gone largely unchallenged by the government and security forces have failed to halt the violence.

Nigeria is roughly 50% Muslim and 50% Christian. The majority of Muslims live in the north and the south is mainly Christian, while the Middle Belt is more diverse. Becoming independent from the UK in 1960, it has a secular constitution, but twelve northern states instituted elements of sharia law between 1999 and 2001.



Barnabas Fund is enabling the victims in Kajuru village, Nigeria to repair their homes

Ask the Lord to protect Nigerian Christians from the relentless persecution and comfort them in their distress. Pray that the schemes of terrorist groups will not succeed and that the government will actively intervene against extremism.



North Korea

North Korea is ranked as the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian. The closed country is under the despotic rule of President Kim Jong-un and strict communist control. His grandfather, Supreme leader Kim Il-sung, established the state ideology of *Juche*, or human “self-reliance”. However, back in 1907, Pyongyang was known as the “Jerusalem of the East” after a Protestant revival, and until 1945, the north was the powerhouse of Korean Christianity.

Some Christians in North Korea have been executed for the “crime” of owning a Bible, and tens of thousands – sometimes entire families – have been incarcerated in political labour camps where they are abused, tortured and worked to death. Christians are often singled out for the worst treatment in the camps. Three generations have been punished for the “crime” of one Christian member.

Christians have to keep their faith completely secret. Many parents dare not even let their own children know they follow Christ, as pupils are encouraged at school to report on their parents if they see them praying or reading the Scriptures.

A traditional North Korean social classification system of *songbun* specifies where you can live, work and even what you can eat, according to your paternal ancestors’ “loyalty” in the time of Japanese rule. Any perceived disloyalty is punished with a low *songbun*. People living in the same

songbun neighbourhood are punished if they do not report neighbours they suspect to be Christian to the authorities.

The state tightly controls the media and prevents North Koreans from getting any information outside of what the government provides. Access to Christian literature is extremely limited.

Every year, thousands attempt to escape to China or South Korea. The Chinese government is thought to conspire with the North Korean authorities to forcibly repatriate those who manage to cross the border. According to an official who defected, escapees are tortured until they reveal where they have been and who they have contacted. Any suspected of being Christian are especially targeted.



In the early twentieth century Pyongyang, now the capital of North Korea, was called “the Jerusalem of the East” because it had so many church buildings

Ask the Lord to protect Christians in North Korea from danger and betrayal. Pray especially for those facing death, torture and abuse in the labour camps.



Pakistan



Christian, Amir Masih, died from torture inflicted while in police custody in Lahore last year. A post-mortem examination found torture injuries on his hands, back and arms from police attempts to extract a “confession”. His brother said police urinated on him while cursing him for being Christian. The Punjab Chief Minister visited the grieving family and President Imran Khan’s government has been supportive of Christians.

Christians in Pakistan may number as many as 3.5 million, around 3% of the population, but they are despised and discriminated against by most of the Muslim-majority. As a result, many Christians live in poverty and are restricted to dangerous, dirty low-status jobs, such as cleaning sewers. Once rare, violent attacks have increased in the last two decades. Christians seldom get justice, because police usually discriminate against them.

Each year, an estimated 700 Christian women and girls are kidnapped, raped, forcibly converted, and married to Muslims. A law passed in Sindh in 2016 was designed to protect Hindu and Christian girls from forced conversions. The law is not yet ratified because of political pressure, although a Sindh parliamentary committee was formed in 2019, with the aim of protecting minorities there from forced conversion.

Pakistan’s notorious “blasphemy” laws are often exploited to target Christians

and settle personal grudges. Entire communities have been violently targeted by Muslims following such allegations. Christians are especially vulnerable, as simply stating their beliefs can be construed as “blasphemy” and the lower courts usually favour the testimony of Muslims, in accordance with sharia.

The “blasphemy” laws include a mandatory death penalty for defiling the name of Muhammad. Although no executions have ever been carried out, at least eight Christians were on death row at the end of 2019. Between 1990 and 2019, 62 Christians were murdered because of “blasphemy” allegations, even before their trial could be conducted in accordance with the law.



Barnabas provides a monthly food parcel for very needy Christian families in Pakistan. This means the families can afford to send their children to school

Pray that “blasphemy” laws will be repealed and those awaiting trials protected and exonerated. Ask that blocks on the Sindh law will dissolve and God will shield all Christians in Pakistan.

Philippines

Twenty people were killed when Islamist extremists bombed a cathedral in southern Philippines on 27 January 2019. The first explosion went off inside during a Sunday service, and a second blast targeted worshippers as they fled. The attack was believed to be carried out by Abu Sayyaf, a militant group linked to Islamic State and active for decades in the majority-Muslim south of the Philippines, an archipelago that is otherwise more than 80% Christian.

The attack on the island of Jolo, capital of Sulu province, came six days after Sulu voters rejected its inclusion in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of southern Philippines. The referendum approved – with 85% in favour – the creation of the Region in the mainly-Muslim Mindanao island group, which effectively formed an Islamic sub-state within the country. The much-delayed introduction of the Region, first proposed in 2013, was an attempt to end a 40-year conflict between the authorities and Islamist armed groups seeking independence for the south, in which at least 100,000 died in the fighting.

Many Christians were among the 100,000 people who remained displaced at the end of 2019, including at least 13,000 languishing in squalid tent cities, because the Philippine authorities delayed rebuilding the southern city of Marawi, left in ruins by an invasion of Islamic extremists in May 2017. During the five-month

siege, militants burned churches and singled out Christians to be killed. Others were taken hostage, made to undertake forced labour or used as sex slaves.

In August 2019, Christian leaders criticised the direction of the nation under President Rodrigo Duterte, who came to power in 2016. In a statement issued after Pastor Ernesto Estrella was shot dead in the street, they condemned the “alarming increase” of violent attacks against Christian human rights defenders.



Scene of destruction outside Jolo cathedral after Islamist extremists detonated two bombs during a Sunday service in 2019. [Image: Tasnim News Agency]

Pray for peace in the Philippines and that Islamist militants finally lay down their weapons to end the campaign of terror against Christians. Ask that Marawi will be rebuilt and those still living in squalid camps will be able to return to their homes. Pray that President Duterte will uphold the rights of Christians in the Philippines and defend those who promote tolerance and peace in the community.



Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, it is a capital offence for a Muslim to leave their Islamic faith. The country's unknown number of indigenous believers must follow Christ in total secrecy.

Christian migrant workers, mainly from Africa, the Philippines and other Asian countries, face potential abuse from employers in Saudi Arabia. Expatriate Christians are, theoretically, allowed to gather privately to worship, but can experience harassment from religious police who raid meetings. Saudi Arabia opened its doors to tourists in 2019, but Christian visitors face arrest if they display their Bible in public.

Islam began in Saudi Arabia and its most holy sites, Mecca and Medina, are there. The kingdom's constitution is the Quran and Muhammad's words and deeds. The judicial system operates under a strict sharia interpretation, which includes punishments such as amputation and flogging. Religious police roam the streets to monitor adherence to Islamic dress codes and other "morality" laws.

Non-Muslim religious buildings are not permitted and no public display of any non-Islamic religion is allowed. Blasphemy carries a potential death penalty, and charges of blasphemy suppress free speech and debate, including on social media. Anti-terrorism laws introduced in 2014 defined terrorism as "calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on

which this country is based". There are no known cases of the law being used against Christians although journalists have been imprisoned. No Christian is known to have been executed for apostasy in recent times.

Saudi Arabia propagates its strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam worldwide. Organisations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Islamic charities and *dawa* (Islamic mission) networks funnel oil money into *dawa* projects across the world. This has included school textbooks that encourage jihad as a means of spreading Islam and present Christians and Jews as enemies. Saudi Arabia is known to have provided financial support to jihadi groups operating in other nations including Syria and Myanmar.



Ruins of a church building, dating from the fourth century, were discovered in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. [Source: Assyrian International News Agency]

Pray for the protection of all hidden Saudi Christians, as well as Christian migrants. Ask that they will be encouraged, and grow in faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ, through their secret study of God's Word.

Women



In many of the contexts where Christians suffer marginalisation and persecution for their faith, women suffer a double vulnerability because of their gender. Christian women whose husbands are imprisoned, maimed or even martyred through persecution are often left with little or no income to support themselves and their children.

Some Muslims consider that all Christian women are “immoral” and that they therefore deserve abuse. The appalling treatment of women and girls at the hands of Islamic State in 2014 – auctioning them off as slaves, or “awarding” them as prizes to soldiers – caused outrage around the world.

In countries such as Egypt and Pakistan, Christian women and girls are vulnerable to kidnap, forced conversion to Islam, and marriage against their will to a Muslim (often, their abductor). Women working in domestic service run the risk of abuse and exploitation.

In Kenya, Barnabas Fund supports a girls’ refuge that takes in girls escaping from abusive practices under traditional African religions.

Barnabas Fund helps women with literacy projects, small business start-up grants and vocational training to enable them to support themselves and their dependants.

Widows in Pakistan are very vulnerable, having lost the respected place in society of a married woman as

well as their husband’s protection and his earnings. They are despised and rejected along with their children.

Rehana, a Christian widow from Pakistan, had to support their children alone after her husband died. Her wages of \$2 a day from working in a vegetable field were not enough to feed her family, let alone pay school fees. “I am thankful to Jesus Christ. He is providing food for my family,” said Rehana. “My children no longer have to sleep with an empty stomach.” Her children have all returned to school, as Rehana can now pay their fees.



Widow Rehana is thankful to Jesus Christ for the food that Barnabas provides, meaning her fatherless children no longer go to bed hungry

Lift up Christian women and girls living in contexts of marginalisation and persecution. Pray that God will provide for these women and their children. Ask that He will comfort all who mourn (Isaiah 61:2). Pray that vulnerable Christian women and girls will be protected from those who would do them harm because of their faith and their gender.



Somalia



Islam is a major pillar of Somali national identity. Somalia’s provisional 2012 constitution declares Islam to be the state religion, with the Quran and Sunna (the life, customs, and examples of Muhammed) as the basic sources of law, which no legislation must contradict. Promoting any religion apart from Islam is illegal.

After a constitutional review launched in 2018, a finalised “more inclusive” document, that politicians say will address voting and other rights issues, is expected to be made permanent by mid-2020.

There is no official prohibition on conversion from Islam but, in effect, this is what has been enforced since the 1992 collapse of the Siad Barre government. In 2016, the country’s Minister of Religious Affairs dismissed the possibility of a Somali ever being Christian.

The tiny Christian community in Somalia, made up almost entirely of converts from Islam face pressure and the possibility of violence. Many have been murdered for apostasy by family, community members or Al Shabaab jihadists. “There is no possible way of having a [Christian] presence in Mogadishu,” a Christian leader has stated.

In August 2017, the government of breakaway Somaliland – which seceded in 1991 – reversed its decision to allow an historic church building in Hargeisa to reopen, to “respect

the wishes of the people and their [Islamic] religious leaders.”

Somalia has been ravaged by conflict since 1991, when rival warlords began fighting for control. In 2006, an Islamic coalition with Al Shabaab as its military wing briefly seized Mogadishu, and most of southern and central Somalia. Despite international efforts, spearheaded by the African Union, to defeat Al Shabaab, it still holds swathes of territory. Allied with Al Qaeda, it aims to establish a caliphate in Somalia and neighbouring regions, such as north-east Kenya. The group has carried out numerous attacks in Kenya, and on its Christian residents, since 2011 when the Kenyan government sent troops into Somalia to counter terrorist activity.



Mogadishu, capital of Somalia

Pray for the protection of Somali Christians who daily face the possibility of violence, and even death, for their faith in Jesus. Pray that the new constitution will usher in greater religious freedoms, helping to restore peace and stability.



Sri Lanka

The peace of Easter Sunday morning was shattered in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019 when Islamic State (IS) suicide bombers carried out coordinated attacks against three churches and three hotels, killing at least 254 people and injuring more than 500. The majority were Sri Lankan Christians, who make up just 8% of the island's population.

In the aftermath of the bombings, tensions between the Sinhala Buddhist majority community and the Muslim community (9%) escalated, with reprisal attacks on mosques and Muslim homes and businesses.

The presidential election in November 2019 was won by Buddhist hardliner Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Previously, as defence secretary, Rajapaksa was instrumental in introducing restrictions on churches. However, some Christian leaders supported his presidency because of his strong stance against Islamist violence. Tensions between the religious communities rose again after the election.

Christians in Sri Lanka are found amongst both Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups. Many are very poor. They are frequently harassed and attacked by Buddhist extremists, often led by monks, and their church services disrupted on spurious claims that churches are legally required to register to hold services. Bishop Asiri Perera, president of the country's Methodist Church, said Christians are not being

treated as equal citizens in their own country when he raised concerns about police inaction following the brutal beating of a Bible college student in August 2019 by extremist monks.

Radical Muslims are also pressurising, sometimes violently, both Christian and Hindu ethnic Tamils in the east of the country to convert to Islam. At least ten Tamil villages are now 100% Muslim and have new Arab names. Hindus make up 14% of Sri Lanka's population. The three-decade civil war, which ended in 2009, is still a bitter memory for the defeated Tamils, not least because they are oppressed and disadvantaged in many ways by the Sinhala-dominated authorities.



Children enjoying Sunday school at Zion Church, Batticaloa on Easter morning, moments before a bomb exploded killing at least 30 people, including 14 children

Pray God will heal survivors of the Easter Sunday 2019 bombings still bearing physical and mental scars. Ask that hostility and injustice towards the Christians in Sri Lanka cease and the community will be able worship freely without threat.



Sudan



The year 2019 saw dramatic change in Sudan, when Omar al-Bashir’s Islamist regime was ousted in a military coup in April. A Transitional Military Council (TMC) took control, and after a few months, the new minister for religious affairs announced that Christians had endured “very bad practices” and would now have the right to freely practise their faith. But Islamist insiders remain in key positions of influence.

The TMC have since repealed a law under which Christian women could face public flogging for wearing “immoral [un-Islamic]” dress, e.g. trousers. However, sharia law and the 1991 Criminal Codes that criminalise apostasy and blasphemy are still in force at the time of writing.

Al-Bashir’s government apparently sought to eradicate Sudan’s Christian minority (now estimated at 3%) by fierce persecution that included demolishing churches, closing schools and imposing sharia.

Sudan is one of the few countries in the world with a formal death penalty for apostasy from Islam, which has been applied at least once in recent times (1985, when a liberal Muslim was executed). In 1995, five young women converts from Islam, from Nuba, were sentenced to death but it is unclear whether the sentences were carried out. In 2018 a convert pastor in Darfur was charged with apostasy and eight

Christians were tortured in an attempt to force them to return to Islam.

A genocidal jihad waged for over 35 years in the Nuba Mountains, Sudan’s oldest Christian region, continues. Christians in this border region with South Sudan suffer aerial bombing (diminishing since 2017), forced conversion, systematic mass rape, jailing of Christian leaders, with many tortured and killed. More than 500,000 died in the 1990s. Deliberate starvation is imposed through a humanitarian aid blockade – aid from the north cannot be trusted and the UN will not enter the disputed territory.



Christian women, imprisoned under sharia law, worshipping with their children in jail. Barnabas supports a prison ministry that helps them both practically and spiritually

Pray that a stable government will be established in Sudan that will be supportive of greater religious freedoms for Christians. Ask that Christians in the Nuba Mountains will be given strength and for an end to the blockade.



Syria

After eight long years of civil war, the faith of Christians has been strengthened through many tribulations. They continue to face gruelling hardship, even as they mourn loved ones – some of whom were martyred for their faith in the Lord Jesus. Food shortages, a lack of employment opportunities and bombed-out homes are just some of the difficulties they endure on a daily basis in some parts of the country.

In October 2019, Christians in north-east Syria had to flee again when Turkish forces invaded. Many families who fled had been displaced several times before, during the civil war, and had finally found stability in the region. Pro-Turkish forces terrorised Christians into deserting their fields and their harvest, after telling them “know that you have no land here anymore”. These threats were contrary to assurances from Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that his forces would not persecute religious minorities.

Before the civil war, which began with the Arab Spring in 2011, around 10% of Syria’s 22 million population was Christian. Many were descendants of survivors of the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turkish government, which peaked in 1915. Unusually for a Muslim-majority country, Christians in Syria enjoyed respect and equality until the rise of Islamist groups, including Islamic State, fuelled violent anti-Christian

persecution. While Western media largely focused on the Syrian army’s war against the rebels, Christians were the targets of kidnappings and murders at the hands of Islamist rebel groups.

Tens of thousands of Christians were among the more than five million refugees who fled since the conflict began. Many of them have been facing discrimination and sometimes violence in the countries where they fled, while those who manage to reach Europe are at risk of being attacked in Muslim-dominated refugee shelters and often find it difficult to claim asylum.



Christian children in Syria, many terribly traumatised during the war, are suffering great hardship

Pray that Christians forced to flee north-east Syria will find safety. Give thanks that the faith of Christians has emerged stronger from the furnace of affliction. Pray that the Lord will continue to provide for them as they rebuild their lives.



Tajikistan

Tajikistan has a Muslim population of around 90% and is one of the most conservative, as well as poorest, of the Islamic Central Asian countries. Islamism is on the rise and it is a difficult place for the small Christian population, especially children and converts from Islam.

Since 2011, children under 18 have been prohibited from taking part in public religious activities. Even the presence of children on church premises can be punished severely.

Christians from Muslim backgrounds are persecuted by authorities and often subjected to violence from their relatives, or threatened with death.

The “extremism law” in Tajikistan (Criminal Code Article 189) punishes people “without requiring acts that involve violence or incitement or imminent violence.” The government uses this law to crackdown on anyone involved in certain religious activities. Churches are frequently inspected by officials who use intimidation, blackmail, illegal searches and seizure of church property to put pressure on Protestant congregations, which include many converts from Islam.

Only one church has managed to gain registration in the last decade, even though the minimum requirement of ten members is much lower than in many other Central Asian countries. Requests for Christian cemeteries are also routinely turned down by authorities.

The government imposes restrictions on all religious groups and these tightened still further in 2018, with amendments requiring that all religious activities must be reported to the state. The import and distribution of religious publications must be approved by the authorities. On 16 January 2019, officials burnt a delivery of 5,000 calendars with Bible verses in the Tajik language.

Because of the dire economic situation, thousands of ethnic Russian and European Christians have left Tajikistan to seek work in Russia, including many pastors. So too have converts from Islam, who often lose their jobs when they decide to follow Christ. The declining numbers make life harder for remaining Christians.



Authorities in Tajikistan film their burning of 5,000 calendars sent to registered evangelical churches

Ask the Lord to uphold Christians in Tajikistan facing increasingly restrictive laws. Pray that authorities will relent in their harassment of Christians and that Christian literature will be permitted to circulate more freely. Ask that Christians imprisoned under extremism laws will be safely released.



Turkey



Repression of religious minorities is increasing in Turkey, which is at least 97% Muslim, particularly under Islamist president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Despite a history of secular government in modern Turkey, Islam is synonymous with national identity and a programme of Islamisation is progressing.

The tiny Christian community in Turkey, which includes a small number of converts from Islam, still bears the trauma of the Armenian, Assyrian and Greek genocides of the early twentieth century, in which at least 3.25 million believers were killed by Ottoman Turks. A Christian leader said Turkey's Christian community, swollen by refugees from Syria, Iraq, Iran and even Afghanistan, is treated as inferior to the Muslim majority (as in classical Islam) and its presence tolerated as a favour, not a right.

Armenian-born Turkish MP Garo Paylan said hate attacks against churches and synagogues take place several times a year and called for an end to "hate generating politics". He spoke out after the words "you are finish" were daubed on a church in Istanbul in February 2019. In Konya, billboards displaying a quote from the Quran declaring that Muslims should not befriend either Christians or Jews were put up at bus stops in October 2019 by the local Islamist Justice and Development Party. The quote was accompanied by an image of a Christian

cross and a star of David splattered with blood.

Pressure from the European Parliament, which expressed concern at discrimination against Christians, was instrumental in the return in May 2018 of 50 churches, monasteries and Christian cemeteries confiscated over the previous decade in Mardin.

In October 2019, Turkish military forces were accused of carrying out a "soft ethnic cleansing" of Christians by terrorising them into fleeing, in an offensive in north-east Syria. This was despite assurances from President Erdogan that his army would not persecute religious minorities.



Chilling posters warning against befriending Christians or Jews were put up by a radical Islamist group

Pray for Christians in Turkey who live in a growing climate of repression and hostility, especially converts and refugees. Give thanks for the return of some Christian property and pray that many more properties taken in past decades will also be returned.



Converts



“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

(Romans 15:13)

Many people from Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are coming to Christ all around the world.

Congregations comprised totally of first-generation Christians have sprung into existence. At the same time, there are also isolated new believers who have no opportunity to meet other Christians.

Converts to Christianity in a Muslim context often face outright rejection from family and community. They risk losing their spouse, children, job, home and possessions. Relatives may seek to kill them to restore “honour” to the family, or zealous Muslims may try to enforce the sharia regulation that demands death for apostates. Converts in Afghanistan and Somalia are in particular danger.

Apostasy from Islam is illegal in many Muslim-majority countries. In a few countries it is even officially punishable by death, although this is rarely enforced and converts are more likely to be imprisoned. This is the case in Iran, where more than a hundred converts are behind bars at the time of writing.

Converts from Hinduism and Buddhism also tend to face rejection, hostility and violence.

Support for such vulnerable new Christians is crucial and Barnabas’ Convert Fund provides this through safe places of refuge, discipleship training and small-business start-up costs.



A church Bible-study group in a Central Asian country. The church told us that every believer in their congregation is suffering some form of discrimination or persecution. Barnabas is supporting new converts in Central Asia with food, winter fuel and other basics needs

Give thanks to the Lord for new converts who willingly take up their cross to follow Jesus (Luke 14:27), enduring loss and suffering for His sake. Pray that God will strengthen, encourage and protect them in their faith. Ask that He will equip them with all they need to grow in the knowledge and love of God. Intercede for new Christians who suffer rejection, that they will be comforted by the assurance that their place in God’s family can never be taken from them.



Turkmenistan



In Turkmenistan the religious context is dominated by Islam and a presidential personality cult. All aspects of public life are under strict government control. Police monitor church activities, raid Christian homes and harass and arrest Christians – particularly church leaders who are sometimes beaten or imprisoned.

Former President Niyazov, who died in 2006, established a quasi-religious cult of personality around himself. His book, the *Ruhnama*, set out his ethos and dominated public life. A pervasive cult of personality has also emerged around current President Berdymukhamedov, who can remain president for life under the current constitution.

Religious laws in Turkmenistan were further tightened in 2016, banning religious meetings in private homes. The option to register as a “religious group” with only five adult members was also replaced with the requirement that a “religious organisation” applying for registration must have at least 50 members.

The Justice Ministry has stalled registration applications, claiming that they contain “errors” which must be “corrected”. When churches have challenged authorities on the grounds that the law upholds freedom of religion, officials have responded by stating that Turkmenistan is a Muslim country. Some churches do not attempt to register

because they do not want to be under government control.

Turkmenistan’s Council for Religious Affairs is staffed entirely by Muslims and rarely grants permission for Bibles to be imported. Missionary activity is considered harmful to society. Christians are barred from social work. Muslims who convert to Christianity are rejected by their family and will usually lose their job. Converts are removed from any public office and come under intense pressure to return to Islam.

Christianity in the region dates back to the third century. About 9% of the population are Russian Orthodox Christians and there is a small, growing community of Muslim-background converts. Ethnic Turkmens account for around 80% of the population and Turkmen identity is bound up with Islam, with Christianity viewed as associated with negative foreign influences.



Turkmen Christian at work

Ask the Lord to sustain Christians in Turkmenistan, especially converts who face considerable pressures. Pray that regulations will be relaxed to allow more churches to register and function legally, and Bibles to circulate more freely.



Uzbekistan

For many years officially secular Uzbekistan, where 93% of the population are Muslim, was the harshest Central Asian country in its treatment of Christians. But President Mirziyoyev, elected in December 2016, has shown a more tolerant attitude.

In the latter part of 2019, a historic breakthrough saw several churches registered, including one in the notoriously strict, autonomous region of Karakalpakstan. Church registration had previously been very difficult to obtain. Despite the softening stance of the government, Christians – especially converts from Islam – still face persecution from other sources such as Muslim relatives, local government officials and Islamist extremists.

Christians are routinely punished for possessing religious literature. A Christian was fined two weeks' average wages in 2019 for giving an Uzbek language copy of the New Testament as a gift. Using a New Testament for "missionary purposes" is a crime, according to the government's Committee for Religious Affairs.

Uzbekistan recognises the Russian Orthodox Church, but discriminates against other Christian denominations. Evangelical churches are growing, with many converts from Islam who face ostracism and pressure from their Muslim relatives and harassment by the authorities.

The government promised to relax religion laws in 2016. Although this has not yet happened, the last two years have seen a decrease in harassment by authorities. Violent police raids on Christian meetings and homes were common in the past, with Bibles and property confiscated and destroyed. Christians were often arrested, detained and fined. During the first days of detention, they were beaten in an attempt to get them to renounce Christ, making sure the injuries will have healed by the time they are released.

Christianity in Uzbekistan was nearly eradicated under the Turkic military leader Tamerlane (1336-1405). Known for his hatred of Christians, he is still celebrated as a hero by Uzbeks. Tamerlane made his capital in the city of Samarkand, using wealth from his conquests to construct grand mosques.



Evangelical churches are growing in Uzbekistan

Praise God that the Church in Uzbekistan is growing, despite persecution. Ask that the new government will progress in its tolerance towards evangelical Christians and lift all restrictions on religious freedom.



Vietnam

The communist, one-party state in Vietnam views any religion with suspicion, but especially Christianity, perceiving it as “Western”. Mahayana Buddhism has historically been the dominant religion, but most Vietnamese follow a blend of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism and earlier folk religion. In some areas, Christians are treated well, but are under constant surveillance in others and face arbitrary arrest. Many tell stories of police brutality and terrible conditions in jail.

Persecution and violence against Christians have increased since a new Law on Belief and Religion came into effect in January 2018. The law requires authorities to protect religious freedom, but includes a sweeping ban on any religious activity that could “harm social order and/or national unity”. Registration is required for religious groups and activities including preaching, teaching and publishing.

Believers from ethnic minorities, accounting for more than half of Vietnamese Christians, experience the worst persecution. Violence against the Hmong people of the north-western Highlands has increased under the new Law. They are discriminated against in higher education and civil service jobs. Christians are sometimes forced out of villages and farmlands, especially if they are recent converts.

The Montagnard ethnic group, from the Central Highlands, has endured

decades of persecution for their Christian faith and are despised for helping the American army during the Vietnam War.

Scores of Montagnards have fled to neighbouring Thailand or Cambodia where they are poorly treated by the authorities. Refugees were rounded up *en masse* in November 2018. Adults were placed in overcrowded conditions in a detention centre and children removed from families.

Their greatest concern remains what might happen if they are deported back to Vietnam. Siu H’Hkli, whose husband was beaten up by Vietnamese police for travelling with a pastor (who was later jailed), spoke for many when she said, “It doesn’t matter where we go, we just cannot go back to Vietnam.”



Ethnic minority Montagnard Christians face particular persecution in Vietnam

Pray that authorities will realise Christians are not a threat but an influence for good in society. Ask that the rise in persecution will reverse and greater religious freedom allowed. Pray that Christians held in prison will be given strength to endure the brutal conditions.



Yemen



War-torn Yemen, on the south-western corner of the Arabian Peninsula, is enduring the world's worst humanitarian crisis as a result of a civil war involving Houthi rebel forces, which intensified in 2015 when a Saudi Arabian led coalition intervened on behalf of the former government. The United Nations warned in 2019 that more than 22 million Yemenis were in immediate need of humanitarian aid, including 15 million on the brink of starvation.

Christians are a tiny minority of the population. Most are expatriate workers, and some are refugees from Ethiopia. Yemeni Christians are converts from Islam; only God knows how many they number.

At the time of writing, Christians, like everyone else, are suffering from a desperate lack of food, water, shelter and medicines.

Islam is the state religion of Yemen, and there is a large minority of Zaidi Shia Muslims. Sharia is the source of all legislation. Proselytising Muslims is illegal, and conversion from Islam is technically punishable by death, although there are no known modern examples of this. Converts nevertheless face arrest and are in danger from their families and communities. Expatriate Christians can worship together, but some have been arrested on charges of "promoting Christianity and distributing the Bible"; others accused of evangelism have been expelled.

Christians are not permitted to be buried in the capital, Sanaa, unless they accept a Muslim name. In 2017, a Christian cemetery in Aden was desecrated at night. The damaged graves included those of Christians murdered in an attack on a Christian-run care home in 2016, in which 16 died.

Christianity was established in Yemen in 354 AD when the Roman ambassador converted the country's pagan king. Yemeni Christians suffered severe persecution, from Jews and Muslims. The Islamic Caliph Umar (634-644 AD) decreed that all Jews and Christians should be expelled from the Arabian peninsula.



Much of Yemen lies in ruins after years of civil war

Pray for peace in Yemen and an end to the suffering endured by its people. Ask that Muslims will look with compassion on Christians, allowing them to worship freely. Pray that Christian converts from Islam will be given strength to stand firm in their faith.



Martyrs



“They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”

(Revelation 12:11)

Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) posted video footage on 26 December 2019 of its militants beheading, on Christmas Day, ten Christian men and shooting dead an eleventh in northern Nigeria.

Radical jihadists like Boko Haram, ISWAP and Islamic State (IS) believe that they are pleasing Allah by killing non-Muslims. The relentless raids on Christian villages in northern Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso and Far North Cameroon are all part of a campaign to “cleanse” their territory of a Christian presence.

Christian converts from other religions risk being killed, often by relatives, sometimes by the community or by Islamist militants. Some governments also target Christians, especially converts from Islam; they can be punished various pretexts or occasionally sentenced to death for apostasy.

Many families lose their only breadwinner when a husband or father is martyred. They need timely and practical help.

For example, Barnabas is supporting the wife and children of Pastor Lawan Andimi, a church leader who was

kidnapped and murdered in northern Nigeria by Boko Haram in January 2020. We are also helping the loved ones of Nigerian bride-to-be, Martha Bulus, who was murdered by ISWAP militants in December 2019. We have also helped with funeral costs after atrocities such as the Easter 2019 bombings in Sri Lanka and on other occasions where grieving families cannot afford even a coffin for their loved ones.



Islamist extremists shot dead bride-to-be Martha Bulus and a group of her friends as they travelled to her wedding in northern Nigeria

Thank God for the assurance of eternal life for all who believe in Jesus. Praise Him for the perseverance of believers who did not cling to life in the face of death (Revelation 12:11). Ask that their sacrifice will embolden others to endure and demonstrate the power of Gospel truth to their killers. Pray, too, that in their grief, the Lord will comfort those left behind and give them His peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7).



Zimbabwe



President Mugabe's 37-year reign ended with a peaceful military "coup" in November 2017. Zimbabwe's 85% Christian population had witnessed terrible human rights atrocities during his regime, with many suffering persecution.

Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom and freedom of expression, churches, and Christian groups were among those targeted for repression and many church leaders were arrested. Religious gatherings perceived to be critical of Mugabe's government were categorised as political events and monitored.

Pastor Evan Mawarire is one of the Christian leaders who suffered numerous arrests for speaking out against injustice. He has condemned the corruption of both Mugabe's regime and President Mnangagwa's. In 2016, Mawarire's "#ThisFlag" movement inspired large-scale protests against Mugabe's totalitarian rule in a call for justice that resonated with Christians. After he led a national strike, Mawarire was charged with incitement to commit public violence. In January 2019, he was arrested again for criticising a 130% fuel hike, but released on bail. At the end of 2019, he was still awaiting trial.

Zimbabwe is in economic crisis due to recurring drought and decades of corrupt, despotic rule. There is terrible poverty, unemployment, hyperinflation and corruption continues. A severe drought struck in 2015-16, but the 2019

drought was the worst recorded in a century. Cyclone Idai destroyed crops and harvests in March 2019, worsening the economy still further.

In January 2019, 600 were arrested in protests against the economic crisis that continues under the new government. It was claimed that dozens were killed. Church leaders in neighbouring Zambia issued a statement: "We cannot sit idle while our neighbours are being beaten, arrested, detained and killed." In April 2019, Zimbabwean Christians marched with crosses in a peaceful protest against the repressive government and the deteriorating economy.



Zimbabwean Christian

Pray that Zimbabwe will recover economically after years of political corruption and drought. Ask that Christians will be free from oppression and for an end to human rights violations. Pray that brave Christians speaking out for truth and justice, will not be discouraged but be strengthened in their faith.



A living hope

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”
(1 Peter 1:3-4)

Christians celebrate Christ’s glorious resurrection as a moment of joyous victory. We can cling to a wondrous hope that goes beyond the grave, no matter what we are going through in this life.

Christ’s resurrection assures Christian brothers and sisters enduring persecution that their life is hidden with Him. Jesus comforts them through His promise that they will appear with Him in glory.

As the Body of Christ, we do not turn a deaf ear to their suffering and ignore their cries. Barnabas Fund has the profound and great privilege of being a channel of love, prayers and support from caring parts of the Body of Christ to those that are hurting.

The writer to the Hebrews encourages believers with the words, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” (Hebrews 10:23). In the midst of terrible trials, Christians facing persecution persevere in the knowledge that Jesus can identify completely with their plight. The Son of God has borne their griefs and their sorrows and will,

one day, reward His saints with a crown of life and the commendation “good and faithful servant”.

As we stand together with our persecuted brothers and sisters, we can look ahead to the moment when, in the words of John Newton’s hymn, “grace will lead us home” – home into the welcoming arms of our loving Saviour.



South Sudanese refugee schoolchildren in Camp Rhino, Uganda

Praise God for the hope we have, that all who are in Christ have already been made alive with Him (Ephesians 2:5) and will one day be with Him in glory. Pray for our brothers and sisters who today face harassment, discrimination, violence and persecution, that they will hold firm in the assurance of that living hope and be sustained through the comfort and power of the Holy Spirit.





Yes, I would like to help persecuted Christians

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Please send me information on being a Barnabas Fund Church Partner

Alternative gift card

If you would like to make a donation as an alternative gift for a friend or relative, we can supply you with an attractive gift card, which you can send to the person for whom you have made the donation. Please fill in the details as you would like them to appear on the card.

"Dear

A gift of \$ has been received on your behalf

from

This gift will assist Christians who are persecuted for their faith. With many thanks on behalf of the persecuted Church"

- Tick here if you do not want the amount to be stated on the card**
- Tick here if you do wish details about the project to be included on the card**

Please state your preferred card choice (see below): . If you would like to have the card sent directly to the recipient, or if you would prefer to receive blank cards and fill them out yourself, please contact your national office (address details below).

If you would like more cards, please photocopy the form or attach a separate piece of paper with the details for extra cards and send it with your donation. You can also call your nearest Barnabas Fund office with the details and pay by credit/debit card over the phone.



If you would like to donate online please go to www.barnabasfund.org/nz/donate or scan the QR code to the left

***We reserve the right to use designated gifts for another project if the one identified is sufficiently funded.**
Barnabas Fund is a company registered in New Zealand, number 9429 0429 68016. NZ Charities Services registration number CC37773.

Lent prayer diary

For those who are using this prayer booklet in Lent 2020, the following schedule of readings and prayers is suggested. It begins on Ash Wednesday, 26 February, and finishes on Easter Day, 12 April.

			26 February	27 February	28 February	29 February
			<i>Afghanistan</i>	<i>Algeria</i>	<i>Azerbaijan</i>	<i>Bangladesh</i>
1 March	2 March	3 March	4 March	5 March	6 March	7 March
<i>Victims of Violence</i>	<i>Burkina Faso</i>	<i>Cameroon</i>	<i>CAR</i>	<i>Chad</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Egypt</i>
8 March	9 March	10 March	11 March	12 March	13 March	14 March
<i>Children</i>	<i>Eritrea</i>	<i>India</i>	<i>Indonesia</i>	<i>Iran</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Kazakhstan</i>
15 March	16 March	17 March	18 March	19 March	20 March	21 March
<i>Refugees</i>	<i>Kenya</i>	<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>	<i>Laos</i>	<i>Libya</i>	<i>Morocco</i>	<i>Myanmar</i>
22 March	23 March	24 March	25 March	26 March	27 March	28 March
<i>Pastors & Evangelists</i>	<i>Nepal</i>	<i>Nigeria</i>	<i>North Korea</i>	<i>Pakistan</i>	<i>Philippines</i>	<i>Saudi Arabia</i>
29 March	30 March	31 March	1 April	2 April	3 April	4 April
<i>Women</i>	<i>Somalia</i>	<i>Sri Lanka</i>	<i>Sudan</i>	<i>Syria</i>	<i>Tajikistan</i>	<i>Turkey</i>
5 April	6 April	7 April	8 April	9 April	10 April	11 April
<i>Converts</i>	<i>Turkmenistan</i>	<i>Uzbekistan</i>	<i>Vietnam</i>	<i>Yemen</i>	<i>Martyrs</i>	<i>Zimbabwe</i>
12 April						
<i>A Living Hope</i>						

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Germany

German supporters may send gifts for Barnabas Fund via Hilfe für Brüder who will provide you with a tax-deductible receipt. Please mention that the donation is for "SPC 20 Barnabas Fund". If you would like your donation to go to a specific project of Barnabas Fund, please inform the Barnabas Fund office in Pewsey, UK.

Account holder: Hilfe für Brüder International e.V.

Account number: 415 600

Bank: Evang Kreditgenossenschaft Stuttgart

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Singapore

Cheques in Singapore dollars payable to "Olive Aid Trust" may be sent to: Olives Aid Sdn Bhd, P.O. Box 03124, Subang Jaya, 47507 Selangor, MALAYSIA

Singaporean supporters may send gifts for

Barnabas Fund online via Olive Aid Trust:

Beneficiary: OLIVE AID TRUST

Bank Name: United Overseas Bank
(Malaysia) Berhad

Swift Code: UOVBYMYKL

Location: KUALA LUMPUR

Account Number: 140-901-654-0

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hope and aid for the persecuted church