



Praying for the Persecuted Church

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hope and aid for the persecuted church

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Front cover: A Zimbabwean Christian woman

Praying for the Persecuted Church

2021-2022

The Apostle Paul, who suffered much persecution, wrote to the believers in Corinth to tell them what he had endured and how vitally important their prayers were in sustaining him and his companions during hardships that seemed too great to bear.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many.
(2 Corinthians 1:8-11)

It is our hope that this booklet *Praying for the Persecuted Church* will help to inform you about the troubles that our brothers and sisters are experiencing in many parts of the world, and inspire and focus your prayers for the 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.

Please do not feel limited by the suggested prayer requests, but pray as you feel led. We know that God answers prayer and can do more than we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

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, 17 February, to Easter Day, 4 April. A reading plan for this period can be found on the inside back cover.

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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 in this strongly Muslim country. Only the Lord knows the exact number of Afghan believers in their homeland, but it is thought to be around 1,000. Converts potentially face murder at the hands of relatives, zealous Muslims, or the Taliban which controls parts of the country. Alternatively, they could be executed for apostasy by the Afghan government.

Many Afghan believers have fled to other countries. Between 2015 and 2017, more than 9,000 Afghan asylum seekers, some of whom were Christians, were deported back to Afghanistan from Europe.

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 (Islamic law) for guidance as to how to handle them. Taliban-controlled areas enforced sharia with public executions and amputations and openly targeted Christians.

In response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001, US-led forces invaded Afghanistan for harbouring Al Qaeda, and toppled the Taliban who had been in power since 1996. However, the Taliban maintained its insurgency against the US-backed government, controlling certain districts. In 2020,

the Taliban controlled 18% of the country, the government controlled 33%, and the rest of the country was contested by both.

After nearly 20 years of war that has killed tens of thousands of people, the Afghan government and the Taliban gathered in Qatar, in September 2020, to start discussing a permanent ceasefire and the rights of women and minorities.

In 1973, Afghan soldiers destroyed the last official church building on Afghan soil (apart from one in the Italian embassy), but its congregation, who were foreigners, continued to meet in other premises until 2010.



Bible apps in the Dari and Pashto languages make God's Word accessible

Ask God to shield Afghan believers and give them encouragement from the Bible and internet ministries. Pray that the intra-Afghan talks will lead to peace throughout the country and greater safety for Christians.

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 an ethnic minority in this Arab-majority country. Conversion from Islam is not a criminal offence, but those who evangelise Muslims risk a five-year jail sentence.

The constitution declares Islam the state religion but adds that “freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion is inviolable”. A draft revised constitution, which was due to be voted on in November 2020, reduces this to just “freedom of opinion is inviolable”.

Freedom of worship is also protected constitutionally. This has been amended in the draft revised constitution to “freedom to exercise worship”, which is protected only if exercised in accordance with the law. But other laws restrict its practice for non-Muslims. For example, according to a 2006 ordinance, the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship grants permits for churches but, so far, no permits have been issued, despite repeated requests by churches.

At least eleven churches have been shut by the authorities since the beginning of 2018. Three, whose congregations total 1,600, were forcibly closed on one day in October 2019.

One of these three, the Source of Life Church in Makouda, appealed the

closure, claiming the governor was not authorised to sign closure orders. However, an administrative court in August 2020 recognised the governor’s authority to close the church under the 2006 ordinance. Most of the other closed churches have filed similar cases with the administrative courts.



Authorities seal the doors to one of three Algerian churches ordered to close on 15 October 2019

Lift up Christians in Algeria and ask that they remain strong, despite setbacks. Pray that the court’s ruling about the Source of Life Church will not set a precedent for other similar cases and instead that permission will be granted to reopen sealed churches. Ask that the authorities will start the process of granting permits for church buildings, so that they are no longer vulnerable to being forcibly closed.

Bangladesh



The People's Republic of Bangladesh was formed in 1971, when East Pakistan seceded from West Pakistan after a bloody civil war. A poor country prone to flooding and cyclones, Bangladesh 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. 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.

Formerly anti-Christian violence was rare but, from 2014, it began to rise, particularly in rural areas. The main targets are converts from Islam and those who are active in evangelising Muslims.

Attempts to Islamise the country have been thwarted politically, 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 billion mosque-building programme.

Illegal land-grabs are common. Ethnic minority Christians are

particularly vulnerable. Desperately poor Christian parents in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have been persuaded by Muslims to send their children away for education. The children are then forcibly converted to Islam in Islamic madrasa schools.

There are a few hundred Rohingya Christians living among 750,000 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 also attacked because of their faith by Rohingya Muslim extremists in the camps.



Fulmoni (67), a widow and convert to Christianity, was rejected by her sons because of her Christian faith. During the Covid lockdown, food aid from Barnabas came as a lifesaving "heavenly gift"

Ask the Lord to protect and provide for Bangladeshi Christians, especially converts, and also Rohingya Christian refugees. Give thanks for those who stand firm in the faith despite persecution, and are even faithful unto death.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso has around 60% Muslims, 30% Christians and 10% followers of traditional African religions. Until a few years ago, the various religions lived in peace together, despite political instability and military coups.

The rise of extremist Islam, from 2015, has caused devastation, destroyed agriculture and displaced more than one million people. This, together with recurring drought and famine and the Covid pandemic in 2020, has plunged the already-poor landlocked country into a humanitarian crisis.

A spate of Islamist militant attacks targeting Christians began in April 2019, and claimed at least 162 Christian lives by the end of the year. In one attack, the jihadists warned, “Flee, convert or die.” Anti-Christian jihadi violence continued in 2020 and by the middle of February that year, the death toll had already reached at least 48. Christians were amongst at least 58 people killed in three attacks within 48 hours in May.

The Christian victims of Islamist violence in Burkina Faso tend to be the men of the community, but on 1 August 2020 it was mainly children who died when a cart they were travelling in rolled over an improvised explosive device, killing six people. The children were on their way home from grazing their families’ livestock.

Christians are sometimes persecuted by followers of traditional African religions. Eleven church buildings were

damaged or destroyed by members of the Gan tribe during a three-day attack in April 2020 in Loropeni town. The attacks were thought to be revenge for the arrests of eight Gan people who had desecrated the grave of a recently deceased Gan Christian. The group had tried to exhume the deacon’s wife in order to impose a “traditional funeral ceremony” (i.e. an animist funeral).



Rice and maize provided by Barnabas to needy Christians in Burkina Faso

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

Victims of Violence and Injustice



"The LORD is my strength and my defence; he has become my salvation." (Exodus 15:2)

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.

Since 2015, West African Islamist group Boko Haram and Fulani militants have killed more than 7,000 Christians in Nigeria alone, thousands of others have been maimed, burned or kidnapped and tens of thousands displaced. Hundreds of Christians have also been killed in Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Mali, and thousands displaced, in recent years.

Al Shabaab continues to be active in Kenya and Somalia, and other violent Islamist groups operate in Ethiopia, Iraq and Syria. 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, but China, with its communist government increasingly oppressive towards Christians, is rapidly catching up.

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

Christians often struggle for justice, especially where they are poor and without influence, such as Egypt and Pakistan. In India there is a tendency for the Christian victims of violence to be arrested and their attackers to go free. They are often discriminated against when general aid is distributed in times of natural disasters and health pandemics.



Barnabas provided emergency aid to Christians displaced by Islamist violence in Far North 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 and give them grace to forgive their persecutors. Praise God for those who endure unjust imprisonment, and ask Him to strengthen them and their families.

Cameroon

Cameroon, formed by an amalgam of former French and British colonies, has a Christian population of around 70% with Muslims comprising 20% (mainly in the Far North). 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 in most of the country. However, in the Far North, which borders Boko Haram's base in north-eastern Nigeria, rural Christian communities are routinely subjected to Islamist violence. For example, two Boko Haram suicide bombers blew themselves up and killed seven people, including the village chief and two teenage boys, on 5 April 2020 in the small border town of Amchide. This town, which is majority Christian, has been attacked many times by Boko Haram.

Attacks by the Nigerian Islamist group have increased since 2014, 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. With food, clothing and livelihoods taken, the defenceless Christians had nothing left but “only eyes to cry” said one Cameroonian Christian.

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. In August 2020, Boko Haram militants descended on a camp for internally displaced people (IDP) in Nguetchewe village and killed at least 18 Christians as they slept; some bodies were found dismembered.



Women mourning with a bereaved Christian family after a murderous attack by Boko Haram on a camp for IDPs in Nguetchewe village

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.

Chad



Chad, a large landlocked country in the heart of the Sahel region of Africa, is scarred by past civil wars and corruption.

Discrimination against the Christian population (around 35%) is the norm in this Muslim-majority nation, which has a long history of Muslims oppressing Christians, including seizing them as slaves. Muslim superiority was reinforced during colonial times.

Although modern Chad is a secular state, with a separation between state and religion, the Muslim majority dominates Chadian politics, civil service, armed forces and business. Uneducated Christians are still vulnerable to exploitation, and Muslim cattle raiders try to grab their land.

The Chadian military dealt a major blow to the Boko Haram Islamist terrorist group in April 2020, but Boko Haram attacks were still a threat as they took advantage of the global focus on coronavirus and local Covid-19 lockdowns. With help from Islamic nations, Muslim missionaries were also very active in Chad in 2020, making use of the multiple humanitarian disasters to advance Islam. Chad faced not only Covid-19 but also five other dangerous diseases, floods and drought in different parts of the country, causing widespread malnutrition. There is “a serious threat to the survival of the Christian faith in Chad”, said one church leader.

Non-Muslims are granted less *diya* (“blood money” i.e. compensation for

injury or damage under sharia (Islamic law) payable to the victim, their family or their community) than Muslims for the same injury. *Diya* is unconstitutional in Chad, yet widely followed. In 2019, the government issued a circular regulating the practice of *diya*, with the criminal code taking precedence in any conflict with *diya* practices.

Christians also face persecution from followers of traditional African religions. Animists account for around one-sixth of the population and flourish in the south of Chad, where most of the Christians also live.



Christians are the poorest sector of Chadian society

Pray that discrimination against, and exploitation of, Christians will end and plans to terrorise and Islamise will fail. Ask God to protect Christians and send His Holy Spirit to strengthen them to withstand the many trials and tribulations they are facing.

China

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is increasingly clamping down on Christians. New regulations in February 2020 gave it control over almost every aspect of religious life. The measures state that religious organisations must submit to the leadership of the CCP and spread its “socialist policies”. Sophisticated electronic surveillance and the removal of social welfare benefits from vulnerable Christians who refuse to renounce their faith are amongst its latest tools for persecuting believers.

Since 2018, there has been an intensification of government action against unofficial congregations, known as “house churches”, and official state-registered churches, called three-self churches. Christians in China are thought to number at least 150 million and increasing fast.

The intensity of the persecution varies across the vast country, but many house churches have been forcibly closed, some even demolished, and leaders and members arrested and imprisoned. Authorities have removed crosses from churches, and ordered that portraits of, or quotes by, President Xi Jinping replace Biblical paintings and verses. In some provinces children are barred from attending church.

During Covid-19 lockdown, Christians were prevented from accessing livestreamed church services; certain churches were banned from using WeChat, the main Chinese

messaging app, to communicate together. After lockdown some churches were only allowed to re-open if the pastor preached sermons extolling President Xi for leading people “in defeating the epidemic”.

Cash rewards are given to individuals who inform on house church activities, with the highest sums given for informing on foreign pastors.

In 2018, the government announced a plan to “sinicise” (make Chinese) Christianity and interpret Scriptures according to secular socialist views.

The CCP’s campaign against non-atheist minorities, particularly Uighurs, has interned tens of thousands in harsh “re-education” camps with 24-hour close surveillance and even forced medication.



Churches are often identified by a red cross set high above the building. The authorities have removed many of these crosses

Pray for courage and resilience for Christians in China that they may stand steadfast in their faith. Pray that the authorities will see Christians as a force for good and harmony in society.

Democratic Republic of Congo



The heavily forested, mineral-rich, north-east region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which borders South Sudan, Uganda and Rwanda, has long been wracked with insecurity. Numerous armed groups, especially an Islamist group called the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), have inflicted immense suffering on the predominantly Christian communities of this region.

The ADF was formed in 1989, with the original purpose of establishing Islamic rule in Uganda. It committed several terrorist attacks before the Ugandan army drove it out of Uganda and into the DRC in 2002. Since then it has killed thousands of Congolese, repeatedly targeting Christians. The DRC is about 90% Christian.

At least 58 people were killed and 17 kidnapped when Muslim militants attacked two villages in north-eastern Ituri province in September 2020, and at least 57 people were murdered in the same province the previous May. Since 2017, villagers in this region have suffered waves of murderous attacks by jihadists, with more than 700 people killed in Ituri province alone.

On 29 January 2020 Ngulongo Year Batsemire (aged 60), a church leader, was martyred after he refused the demands of jihadists that he convert to Islam. The militants had also demanded that he tell them where they could find other pastors. Around the same time, ADF militants murdered

at least 30 other people in night-time raids on four villages.

The area has seen a surge of violence since October 2019, when the Congolese army launched a large-scale offensive against the Islamist militants. Every time the army mount an operation against the ADF, civilians are attacked afterwards by the ADF as retribution.

UNICEF reported in October 2020 that over 1.6 million people were internally displaced in the north-east of DRC.



Rev Kisanga Banambaga received aid from Barnabas during Covid lockdown. He said, "Really God hear our prayers and respond in His time."

Ask the Lord to thwart the ADF's plans to terrorise and Islamise Christians in the north-east of DRC. Pray that Christians will be given grace to forgive their persecutors and church leaders equipped to lead and minister to God's persecuted people.

Egypt



Islamic State (IS) attacks have slowed in Muslim-majority Egypt, compared to a few years ago when terrible IS atrocities included suicide bombings at two churches on Palm Sunday 2017 that claimed at least 46 lives. In April 2020, the suspected mastermind behind the bombing of several churches in Egypt was captured by the Libyan National Army.

Egypt has remained under a state of emergency, and terrorism is still a threat to Christian targets. Security forces foiled an Easter terror plot in April 2020 in the El-Amiriya neighbourhood of Cairo, which has a significant Christian population and several church buildings. The Islamist terrorists planned the attack while the authorities' attention was diverted into combatting coronavirus.

President al-Sisi has often condemned attacks on Christians and spoken supportively about the Christian community (about 10% of the Egyptian population). His government has continued to legalise churches and church-affiliated buildings, following its repeal of Ottoman-era restrictions in September 2016. The licensing process remains fairly slow, despite calls for the process to be expedited. In October 2020, the number of churches licensed stood at only 1,738, out of 3,730 that applied for approval. A number of churches were already licensed before the law was introduced. Until the licensing committee began work early in 2017, it was extremely difficult to obtain

a licence. It is illegal to worship in an unlicensed church building.

Nevertheless, 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 in Egypt dates back to the first century AD, and there has been a continuous Christian presence despite centuries of anti-Christian discrimination since the arrival of Islam.



With a microloan provided by Barnabas, Samia (35), a poor Christian mother of three, bought watermelons to sell outside her home

Give thanks for President al-Sisi's support of Christians and ask that all Egyptian Muslims 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.

Eritrea



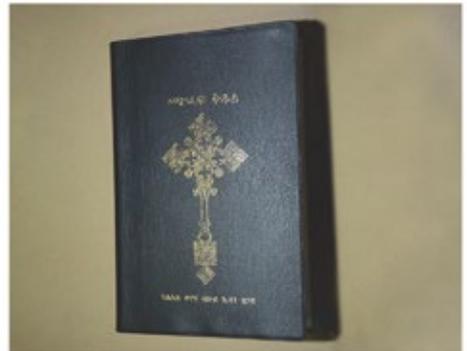
Eritrea remains one of the worst countries in the world for Christian persecution. Imprisoned Christians are tortured, starved and forced into hard labour. Conditions are worse for pastors and theological students who are singled out for beatings or have their jail terms extended as a warning to others. Many Christians are held indefinitely, often without trial, not knowing when they will be released. Some are kept in shipping containers, where they are exposed to the searing desert heat by day and cold by night.

By 22 September 2020, the government, apparently as part of its Covid-19 control measures, had released 69 Christian prisoners, most of whom had been held for over ten years without trial, some for as long as 16 years. The releases were made on condition that bail securities were lodged, usually in the form of property deeds, with guarantors held liable for the detainees' future actions. None of the known imprisoned pastors or senior Christian leaders were among those released.

A number of the releases were from Mai Serwa, a notorious high-security military detention facility, near the capital, Asmara, which is known to put detainees in underground cells and metal shipping containers. At the time of writing, there are thought to be about 300 Christians still in detention, including children.

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.

Tens of thousands of Christians have fled Eritrea, many seeking refuge in Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and Israel.



A Bible in Tigrinya, one of the languages of Eritrea

Ask the Lord to strengthen Christians and bring healing and restoration to those released from prison, especially those who have no home to return to. Pray that the hearts of the authorities will soften to release more imprisoned Christians and allow believers of all denominations to worship freely.

Children



“Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.”
(Proverbs 22:6)

Christian children are often “on the frontline” of discrimination and persecution. For minority Christian children in countries around the world, school is often 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.

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.

Young converts often lose their families. “Mark” (15) from south-east Asia became a Christian through a

school friend. When his father found a Bible under his pillow, he ordered Mark to reject Jesus or leave the family home and village, which worshipped spirits. On confirming his belief in Jesus, Mark was thrown out.



Barnabas supports 124 Christian schools in Pakistan, enabling Christian children to get an education in a loving Christian environment

Pray for the children of persecuted Christian families and children who decide to follow the Lord even when the rest of their family does not believe. Ask that the Lord will lighten their path to grow up to be strong in their faith. Ask Him to be their Protector and their Comforter in the face of danger. Pray that Christian children in Pakistan and Egypt will be enabled to break free from the cycle of poverty and illiteracy in a safe and nurturing learning environment.

Ethiopia



Ethiopia, is the second most populous nation of the African continent, with many ethnicities and languages.

Ethiopia officially accepted Christianity in the fourth century. It remains the dominant religion, but Islam is followed by about a third of the population. Ethiopian Christians look back to the Ethiopian eunuch, who was led to the Lord by the apostle Philip, as the first Ethiopian believer (Acts 8:26-39).

Recent years have seen periodic violent attacks on Christians. In late June 2020 violence erupted again, in which hundreds of Christians of many ethnicities were brutally slaughtered by members of Qeerroo (meaning “bachelors”), a male youth movement of the Oromo ethnic group. The killings were apparently coordinated and Islamist-inspired; some of the Qeerroo carried lists of named individuals to find and kill – individuals who were actively involved with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

One Oromo Christian was beheaded for refusing to deny his faith by tearing off the thread around his neck, a sign of his baptism. Police at first stood by as the murders unfolded and some local authorities assisted the militants to find Christians. Christian businesses and homes were burnt down, vandalised or destroyed by the extremists.

In 2018, Abiy Ahmed, a Christian from a Muslim background, became Ethiopia’s first Oromo Prime Minister.

He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his efforts to resolve a conflict between Ethiopia and its neighbour Eritrea, which had seceded from Ethiopia in 1993 after a long war.

Oromo media mogul and Muslim activist, Jawar Mohammed, provoked unrest in October 2019, when he criticised the government. Violent protests ensued leading to 67 deaths. Around the same time, two pastors were beheaded in Sebeta, Oromia region, and many churches were burnt.



Ethiopia was affected by a severe locust plague in 2020. Barnabas provided emergency food relief for Christians

Ask the Lord to give Prime Minister Abiy wisdom, insight and strength as he seeks to lead Ethiopia from division to unity. Pray for an end to anti-Christian violence, comfort for the grieving, healing for the wounded, and food and shelter for the displaced.

India



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

Persecution and anti-Christian violence have worsened since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014. The police response to anti-Christian violence is often dismissive.

The strict Covid lockdown in 2020 brought huge suffering in India, worse than in most other countries. In certain Indian states where the BJP holds power, Christian families and especially pastors were refused government food aid by the distributors.

Lockdown saw a marked increase in targeted hate and violence against Christians. Christian missionary, Munshi Dev Tado, was shot dead by suspected Maoist Naxalites in Maharashtra State on 10 July. In June, P Jeyaraj and his son Emmanuel Benicks died after being tortured to death in police custody in Tamil Nadu State, and 14-year-old Samaru Madkami, a convert who was very active in sharing his faith, was brutally tortured and killed in Odisha State.

Suman Munda, who was killed by Hindu extremists in Jharkhand State in July 2020 while attempting to protect her daughter from sexual assault, had been harassed by Hindu radicals from the moment they

learned about her conversion to Christianity six years earlier.

Since 1978, Freedom of Religion Laws have been 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.

The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Act 2020 was passed by Parliament in September 2020. This could adversely affect religious minorities who receive funding from outside India including many Christian organisations.



Barnabas gave Covid-19 emergency food and hygiene support to about 8,000 Christians in India, including 100 blind Christians, four of whom are shown here

Ask God to protect Indian Christians against discrimination and violence, and comfort those who have lost loved ones. 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, has seen a rise in recent years of hard-line Islamic ideology.

Only a generation ago, Muslims and Christians lived peaceably as respectful equals in accordance with the state-promoted philosophy "Pancasila". But now Christians (more than 15% of the population) experience many difficulties.

The threat from Islamic extremism, pressure from local authorities and hostility from the Muslim community vary greatly in intensity across the country. In the last twelve years, West Java with its large Christian population has seen the most incidents of intolerance towards Christians. But Aceh, which has implemented sharia even for non-Muslims under certain circumstances, is where the most severe persecution occurs.

Since the introduction of the 2006 decree on places of worship, over 1,000 church buildings have been forcibly closed on various pretexts and Christians prohibited from worshipping in many provinces, including West Sumatra, Jambi, Banten, DKI Jakarta, DI Yogyakarta and East Kalimantan. In 2019, a congregation in Riau was even stopped from worshipping in a tent after its church building was forced to shut. In Muslim-majority provinces, it is almost impossible to get permission to build a new church building.

The central government has taken some steps to try to combat the rise

of hardline Islamism, especially in the civil service and schools. But in June 2020, the Communications and Information Ministry removed a Bible app in the Minang language from the Google Play Store at the request of the governor of West Sumatra. The mainly-Muslim Minangkabau are the fourth largest ethnic group in Indonesia.

The moderate Muslim movement, Nahdlatul Ulama, which claims to be the world's largest Muslim organisation with 90 million adherents, has recently broken with classical Islamic teaching by abolishing the legal category of "infidel" (*kafir*) for non-Muslims.



Christians in Singkil District, Aceh still worship in tents after their church buildings were damaged and burned by mobs in 2015

Give thanks for the Muslim-background believers who come to faith and follow the Lord despite persecution. Pray that the Word of God will be available to all in Indonesia. Ask that church buildings be reopened, especially in Aceh.

Iran

Iran is the leading Shia Muslim country and has been an Islamic Republic since the 1979 revolution. An Islamic cleric, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the Supreme Leader and appoints key judicial and military posts.

Historic Assyrian and Armenian Christian minorities, whose languages are not understood by the majority Muslim population, are permitted to worship in their own languages. There are thought to be around one million Muslim-background Christians inside Iran. These are the main target of persecution, as well as any Christians who evangelise Muslims or conduct worship in Farsi, the national language.

Such Christians are often charged with “acting against national security” and imprisoned. For example, seven Christians from a Muslim background were convicted of “propaganda against the state” and sentenced to a variety of penalties in June 2020, including prison, fines and other punishments. Their convictions were based on possession of Christian literature and other materials that suggested they had been evangelising Muslims.

There are also many Christian converts from Islam amongst the Iranian diaspora. 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. Because so many do leave, it means

that most leaders of convert groups have little theological education.

In May 2020, the Iranian parliament approved changes to its Islamic Penal Code that make it easier to repress and punish converts from Islam and Christians seeking to share their faith. Anyone found guilty of using “mind control methods” or “psychological manipulation” for “deviant educational or propaganda activities that contradict or interfere with Islamic teachings” can now be punished, even with the death penalty.



A court ruled that Lydia, the adopted daughter of converts Sam and Maryam, must be removed from her parents, after they were sentenced in June 2020 regarding their Christian activities

Ask that new believers leading convert groups will be equipped by the Lord to nurture even newer converts toward a firm grounding in their faith. Pray for courage for imprisoned Christians and for those who have to flee their homeland and families.

Iraq

A large proportion of Iraq's remaining Christian population now lives in Iraqi Kurdistan. The ethnic cleansing and conquest of Mosul and the Plains of Nineveh (the historic centre of Iraqi Christianity) by Islamic State (IS) militants in 2014 caused huge numbers of Christians to flee to Erbil in the east or Dohuk in the north, the two largest cities of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The very few who remained, and those who have tried to return to their homes since the area was liberated from IS control, face an uncertain future, in a country led by a fragmented Shia government, not supported by many minority Sunnis. Many Christians' homes in this area were occupied by IS, some were destroyed and others fraudulently sold, so many families have nothing to return to. Furthermore, the brief IS occupation has created an ongoing "culture of hate" amongst Muslims towards Christians.

In June and July 2020, a Turkish air campaign against the Kurdish PKK fighters inflicted terror on civilians, whether Kurdish or Assyrian (i.e. Christians). Zakho district in Dohuk Province is home to around 12,000 Christians in about 20 villages. The airstrikes emptied nine of the eleven Christian villages in the sub-district of Darkar and left the agricultural land burnt. Hundreds of Christians were forced to flee, many of them people who

had already fled from their homes in the Plains of Nineveh in 2014.

It is estimated that around 75% of Iraq's Christian population (around 1.5 million believers in 1990) have left the country altogether in the last 30 years, 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.



Iraqi Christians at a church in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan

Ask the Lord to protect and strengthen Iraqi Christians who 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 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 1991 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 Religion Law 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. Unregistered churches are raided by police who seize property and fine or arrest and imprison Christians for worshipping “illegally”.

The law also prohibits evangelising and bans religious organisations from receiving foreign donations. In 2018, the government approved a raft of amendments imposing even

harsher restrictions, including a ban on religious teaching unless within a registered organisation – effectively making religious discussions in private homes illegal.

Property issues are used as a way of restricting freedom of religion. In 2020, two pastors in the capital Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana) appealed directly to the president to stop local authorities seizing the land on which their churches stand.

Religious literature is subject to compulsory pre-publication censorship and can be distributed only in state-approved venues. Courts ordered the destruction of 196 Christian publications in March 2020, which were being offered for free on the streets of a village in the north-eastern Pavlodar Region by two Christians, who were each fined one month’s average wages.



Barnabas helped with school uniforms for children from poor Christian families so they can attend school

Pray that the Church in Kazakhstan will be given courage to continue to spread the Gospel and remain steadfast when suffering persecution from the authorities. Pray that the restrictions on religious freedoms will be removed.

Refugees and Internally Displaced People



"Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who are out to destroy me." (Psalm 17:8-9)

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 to take refuge in IDP (internally displaced people) camps in Nigeria. In Far North Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Mali thousands of Christians are being displaced from rural villages by ongoing, ruthless Islamist 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 ethnic minority villages are often attacked by the army and all the inhabitants must flee or be killed. Many end up languishing for years in IDP camps.

Christian refugees often find themselves under attack in their places of refuge, from fellow refugees of another religion, for example Rohingya

Christians in camps in Bangladesh. This can even happen in Europe.

Christian converts in India and in some south-east Asian countries can be cast out of their homes, often with accompanying farmland, and villages because of their faith in Jesus.



Christian Rohingyas meet for prayer in their living quarters at a refugee camp in Bangladesh after their church was destroyed in an attack by extremist Muslim Rohingyas

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. 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).

Kyrgyzstan



The population of Kyrgyzstan is 86% Muslim and there has been a revival of Islamic practices since the country gained independence from communist Soviet rule in 1991. Kyrgyzstan was the most relaxed towards Christians out of all the Central Asian countries after independence, until the passing of a restrictive Religion Law in 2009. A June 2020 law on the Manipulation of Information, to enable censorship of online media, was passed but in August the president signed objections to it, saying it needed revision.

As at September 2020, there were 259 evangelical churches registered in Kyrgyzstan, with approximately 32 new churches added since April 2019. But many other churches, mostly small (10-20 members), are unregistered and therefore operating illegally. Christians can be punished for sharing their beliefs in public places and religious literature requires state censorship before it is imported or given away. However, most persecution comes not from the authorities but from Muslim clerics, relatives, employers and the community, especially in rural areas.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Christians were very active in helping the needy. When the authorities saw one congregation's zeal in feeding those quarantined in their church building (including the homeless), they gave them a list of isolated elderly people to feed as well.

Emigration is affecting the economy and also the Church, as church leaders leave the country in search of work.

In Kyrgyz culture there is great concern about what happens to the body after death; converts fear being given Muslim funerals because there are very few Christian cemeteries.

Massive protests followed parliamentary elections on 4 October 2020, the results were annulled, and the president resigned.



Believers in Kyrgyzstan studying the Word of God together. The books are the New Testament in the Kyrgyz language, and on their phones is the Kyrgyz Old Testament

Thank the Lord for continued Church growth. Pray for protection for Christian converts and ask our heavenly Father to provide for those who cannot get work to support their families because of their faithfulness to Christ. Ask that Christian leaders will stand firm in the face of persecution.

Laos

Laos' approximately 150,000 Christians are targeted at both local and government level. While Buddhists enjoy comparative religious freedom, local officials are typically highly suspicious of Christians, partly because of a perceived connection with the West, and subject them to harassment and violence. The communist central government imposes tight restrictions on religious activity. Christians living in large cities are generally acknowledged and respected, but in rural areas they are often abused, evicted from their homes and even imprisoned and sometimes tortured.

In December 2019, a “Law on the Evangelical Church” came into force giving Christians the right to conduct services, preach throughout the country and maintain contacts with believers in other countries, but churches must fund their own operations. To make the law more widely known in areas of persecution, in particular remote rural areas, Christian communities worked with the government to provide seminars.

Despite the new law, rural Christians were still abused in 2020. Seven Christian families (about 25 people) were evicted from their village in Luang Namtha Province, and seven Christians in Salavan Province were thrown out of their homes and had to live in the forest, with relatives and other villagers forbidden to help them. Both groups had refused to renounce their faith.

Religious organisations are required by law to register with the government, but some churches are unable to meet the onerous registration requirements. Approval is required before importing printed or electronic literature. Local authorities sometimes ban house churches and confiscate Bibles, even from those belonging to registered churches.

A 2017 decree prohibited “associations” from disturbing the “social order” or “national harmony”. The vagueness of the wording means authorities are free to define what constitutes threatening “social order”.

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 church in the capital, Vientiane

Pray for believers in Laos that they will continue to share the Gospel of Christ, knowing that the Lord is with them. Pray that the “Law on the Evangelical Church” will become widely known and applied.

Libya



Libya's interim constitution (2011) declares Islam the state religion and sharia (Islamic law) the principal source of legislation, but guarantees non-Muslims the freedom to practise their religion and prohibits religious discrimination. The internationally recognised Government of National Accord's (GNA) policies contradict these claims. It seems 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 "modern-day slave markets".

Violence against Christian refugees held in detention centres is commonplace. Most of the refugees are from West African countries or Eritrea, attempting to reach Europe. At Eastertime 2019 militias attacked the Qasr bin Ghashir detention centre and opened fire on Christian refugees gathered for prayer, killing two and injuring up to 20. A tuberculosis outbreak at the Zintan detention centre in 2019 killed 22 people, mostly Eritrean Christians, but there was no provision for non-Muslim burials, so the bodies were packed into refrigerators for months.

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

legitimacy. Parliament, based in Tobruk in the east, has refused to recognise the GNA, which controls western Libya; the powerful Libyan National Army only recognises parliament.

Militant Islamist groups, thought to number nearly 2,000 in 2016, have built a strong presence in the country since the fall of Gaddafi. Several thousand IS fighters moved to Libya when ousted from Syria. In 2019, Turkish militias were deployed to support the GNA and in January 2020, the Turkish parliament authorised sending troops to Libya.

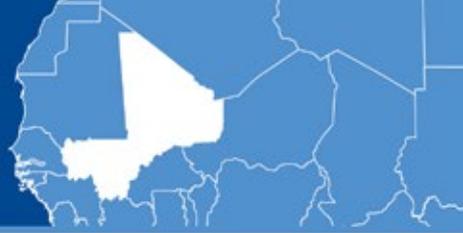
A ceasefire agreed in January 2020 did not hold, and a proxy war continued. Another ceasefire was agreed in August and another in October.



Al-Saraya al-Hamra (The Red Castle) houses a museum including historical Christian artefacts. Libya had a creative Christian community in ancient times

Ask for the protection of Christians, especially converts from Islam. Pray for an end to the modern-day slavery of migrants. Pray for lasting peace, justice and stability.

Mali



Despite being majority Muslim, Mali has a secular government and religious freedom.

Christians number only about 2% of the population. A new president, Bah Ndaw, was sworn in on 25 September 2020, after a military coup in August, to rule for a transitional period of 18 months. The ousted government had been considered corrupt.

The impoverished West African country is struggling to control jihadists who are roaming around the north. They are fairly popular with local people, who like their sharia courts, which deal out justice that is quick, cheap and understandable, and the low crime levels that result from sharia punishments. The jihadists also provide Quranic schools in an area where there is very little education available.

Mali suffered a year of extreme violence in 2019, with jihadi militants carrying out murderous attacks, laying waste to Christian villages and causing hundreds to flee with only the clothes on their backs. The violence continued in 2020, with heavily-armed jihadists on motorcycles murdering 27 people in three attacks on mainly-Christian Dogon villages in central Mali in less than 24 hours on 26 May. Some were shot, others were burnt to death.

Many Christians have fled for safe areas, but these places have insufficient food and shelter. "People continue to move because where they were living they risked being killed by terrorists,"

wrote a Christian leader in Mali to Barnabas in July. In Mali the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) almost doubled in 2019, to reach over 200,000 and more than 1,200 schools were forced to close between April 2017 and December 2019.

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara has exploited the tri-border region of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, spilling terrorism over borders. As armed forces retreat from this remote region, it is becoming a no-man's land under the rule of a jihadi insurgency.



A Dogon Christian woman signing, with a fingerprint, to confirm receipt of aid from Barnabas

Pray that Islamist violence will come to an end in Mali. Ask that the Christians will not be fearful but will be filled with peace, knowing God's presence with them.

Mozambique



Mozambique, in south-eastern Africa, has a Christian majority of nearly 60%.

While Muslims are a minority overall at less than 20%, in the northern coastal province of Cabo Delgado they comprise a majority.

Located some 1,500 miles (2,500 km) north of the capital Maputo, Cabo Delgado is isolated and, despite the discovery of gas reserves in 2010, neglected and under-developed. The local Mwani people (89% Muslim), have yet to see any benefit and many have been evicted from their homes, and lost farmlands and fishing grounds.

In 2020, a militant Islamist organisation called Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama (ASWJ), an Islamic State affiliate, effectively gained control of a very poor area of Cabo Delgado, which since August included the strategic port city of Mocimboa da Praia.

Known locally as Al Shabaab,* ASWJ started operating in Cabo Delgado in 2015, at the same time as radical Muslims from the Gulf, Kenya and Tanzania established a presence there, teaching a violent and extremist ideology. Its first attack was on a police station in October 2017. Since then more than 1,000 people have been killed in over 370 attacks. In 2019 ASWJ pledged allegiance (*baya*) to Islamic State Central African Province.

In the areas controlled by ASWJ, sharia (Islamic law) is imposed and people who try to escape are killed.

Locals are encouraged to join its jihad and train for military operations, this being one of the few ways of earning an income in Cabo Delgado.

When ASWJ kill, it is typically in a grotesquely savage way with bodies hacked to pieces, leaving heads and limbs strewn everywhere. They also burn villages and maim or kidnap their inhabitants. In April 2020, 52 young men in a mainly Christian village were slaughtered when they refused to join ASWJ, and in June a number of church properties and the homes of Christian workers were burnt.



Mozambican Christian praying about Covid-19

Ask the Lord God Almighty to bring deliverance, peace and stability to northern Mozambique, where relationships between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority used to be good. Thank the Lord that many Muslims still reject violence in the name of Islam.

*not the Somali organisation Al Shabaab

Myanmar

In 87% Buddhist Myanmar (Burma), the identity of the ethnic Burman majority is tied to Buddhism.

Christianity is portrayed as a foreign religion. Most Christians are from non-Burman ethnic minorities including the Chin, Karen and Kachin.

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

For decades, the military-controlled government has brutally oppressed Christian and Muslim ethnic minority groups. Hundreds of thousands of them have been displaced, often by aerial bombardment, and many are living in IDP (internally displaced persons) camps. In 2020, about 100,000 ethnic Kachin, who are predominantly Christian, remained scattered across 138 IDP camps where, in crowded conditions with little sanitation, they were at great risk from coronavirus.

Since 2019, Chin Christians have been caught in the middle of fighting between the Myanmar Army and the rebel Arakan Army. The conflict has killed 260 civilians and displaced more than 160,000. In 2020, thousands endured severe food shortages for at least six months because the government put up road blockades, cutting off food supplies to the area. In

March, traumatised Chin Christians fled for their lives after military jets opened fire on their villages, killing at least 28 people and burning many homes. The Chin ethnic group is about 90% Christian and Chin State is very poor.

Even during the transition to civilian democratic rule, a process which began in 2011, violence against the ethnic minorities continued. Violence against the Karen began to escalate in December 2020. On 1 February 2021 the elected government was overthrown in a military coup.



Classes at this theological college continued online during Covid-19 lockdown with a good internet connection funded by Barnabas

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

Pastors and Evangelists



"I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding."
(Jeremiah 3:15)

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. When Covid-19 lockdowns prevented Christians gathering, many pastors no longer received the donations from Sunday service offerings on which they used to live. In India, some pastors were excluded from government support during lockdown.

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. As shepherds who care for the sheep, they often minister in dangerous areas and step in to protect their flock. Pastor Alubara Audu was killed by Fulani militants in September 2020 in Kaduna State, Nigeria, as he tried to warn other residents in his mainly Christian village.

Governmental authorities seeking to weaken the Church also tend to focus their harassment on Christians in leadership roles. In Iran and Eritrea, those active in evangelistic outreach or leading house churches will be imprisoned for longer periods.



Cyril from Madagascar was one of many church workers who received Covid-19 emergency support from Barnabas

Give thanks to God for pastors, church-planters and evangelists who serve 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, which since 2008 has been officially a secular nation. 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. A growing religious nationalism has taken root in the country, with demands for Nepal to return to a Hindu state.

A law that came into force in 2018 made it a criminal offence to attempt to convert a follower of a religion “being practised since ancient times”. This is interpreted as a religion passed down through at least three generations, thus protecting Hindus and Buddhists but excluding most Nepali Christians, who are either first- or second-generation believers. The 2018 law also bans “hurting religious sentiment”, a wording so vague that it makes almost any public Christian activity potentially “illegal”. In effect, Christians can no longer evangelise Hindus or Buddhists, or even state publicly what they believe, without risk.

A number of Christians were arrested for breaking the 2018 law in 2018-19 but at the time of writing there are no known convictions. Followers of other religions do not seem to have been arrested.

Christians are generally marginalised and treated as second-class citizens.

However, there are cases of local government and MPs giving funds to construct churches or for Christmas celebrations.

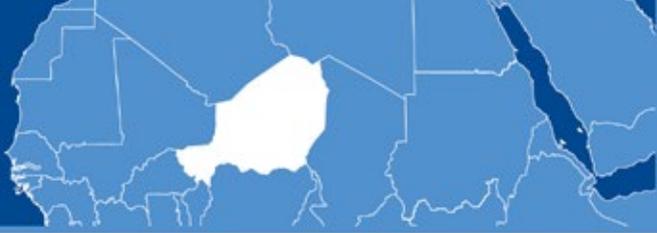
An estimated 50,000 Nepali labourers, who had been working in Covid-infected India, hastily crossed back into Nepal in March 2020 just before India closed the border. In some places, Nepali local governments gave relief supplies to churches for distribution among the believers affected by the Covid crisis.



Christian families in remote mountain villages were given emergency food aid by Barnabas in the Covid crisis

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.

Niger



Despite being 98% Muslim, Niger has a secular government and a high degree of religious freedom. Christians comprise less than 0.4% of the population.

In 2019, the government affirmed its support for religious freedom in the first article of a new law: “The purpose of this law is to guarantee the free exercise of religion in the Republic of Niger.” The law also highlighted that all are free to worship, but religious observance should be exercised with respect for “public order, peace and social tranquillity”. It introduced a formal religious building control process, including a requirement to declare funding sources. Religious education establishments are also to be regulated.

A Muslim mob burned out a church, which was also a pastor training centre, in the southern city of Maradi in June 2019 in protest over the arrest of an influential imam who criticised the new religious law. He later apologised for his comments, which had labelled the new law as “anti-Islamic” thus causing the mob attack.

The militant Islamist group, Boko Haram, which has a grip on northern Nigeria where it originated, stepped up attacks in south-eastern Niger in 2019. In March alone, 88 civilians were reported killed. The Islamist militants issued a warning to Christian families in the area, giving them three days to flee their homes or be killed. Several Christians fled to the border city of

Diffa. In that year there was estimated to be 200,000 displaced people in the Diffa region, some of whom had fled from the Boko Haram insurgency in neighbouring Nigeria.

In a pre-recorded address to the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2020, President Mahamadou Issoufou stressed that only international action can restore security in the strife-torn Sahel region and Lake Chad Basin. Niger borders with Mali and Burkina Faso in the west, Nigeria and Benin to the south, and Chad to the east.



A Christian girl in front of her traditional home in a remote village in Niger

Give thanks that the government of Niger is supportive of religious freedom. Pray for protection for the tiny Christian minority and a safe place for the displaced. Ask that peace will reign in this troubled region of the world.

Nigeria



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

Since 2015, extremist violence has killed more than 7,000 Christians. Thousands have been maimed, kidnapped or had their homes and livelihoods destroyed. “We are tired and we do not want to bother others about our tragedies. We seem always to be reporting deaths and attacks, and people are weary of our reports,” said a Middle Belt village head in 2020.

Fulani militant attacks on southern Kaduna’s Christian villages spiked in 2020, despite 24-hour Covid curfews. During three weeks in July, 171 deaths were recorded. The authorities and security forces seemed unable or unwilling to protect the mainly-Christian farming communities. After the massacre of 21 believers at a wedding, a church leader lamented, “it is as if the lives of Christians no longer matter”.

A convoy of 22 trucks loaded with heavily armed jihadists thundered into mainly-Christian Kukawa town, in the north-eastern state of Borno, on 18

August 2020, taking hundreds hostage. The 1,200 residents had only recently returned to their homes, full of hope to restart their lives and cultivate their farmlands after being displaced for two years.

Boko Haram is aiming to establish an Islamic caliphate in the north-east and seems to be seeking to “cleanse” its territory of any Christian presence. Twelve northern states instituted elements of sharia law between 2000 and 2001.



Barnabas sent aid – food, blankets, mats, roofing sheets – to victims of a violent attack on Hura village, Plateau State in April 2020

Ask the Lord to protect Nigerian Christians from relentless persecution and comfort them in their distress. Pray that the plans of terrorist groups will be thwarted and that the government will actively intervene against extremist violence.

North Korea



North Korea is probably 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”.

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 have been incarcerated in political labour camps where they are abused, tortured and worked to death. Christians are singled out for the worst treatment in the camps. Three generations have been punished for the “crime” of one Christian family member.

Many parents dare not even let their own children know they follow Christ, as pupils are encouraged at school to report their parents if they see them praying or reading the Scriptures. Neighbours can be punished for failing to report suspected Christians living nearby.

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.

Thousands attempt to escape the country. The Chinese government is

thought to conspire with North Korean authorities to forcibly repatriate those who cross the border. According to an official who defected, captured escapees are tortured until they reveal where they have been and who they have contacted. Christians are especially targeted.

In January 2020, the country’s only active border, that with China, was closed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in a serious shortage of food, in this hunger-prone country, and also medicine. On 16 June North Korea blew up the liaison office in the border town of Kaesong, which had been opened in 2018 as a venue for meetings between officials from the two Koreas, which separated in 1945.



Chilgol Church, Pyongyang, dedicated to Kang Pan-sok, the Christian mother of Kim Il-sung

Pray for daily grace for Christians, who are in danger every moment. May all facing death, torture and abuse in labour camps know God’s sustaining power.

Pakistan



Christians in Pakistan form around 3% of the population, and are generally despised by the Muslim majority. Many Christians live in great poverty and are restricted to dangerous, dirty, low-status jobs, such as cleaning sewers. 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. Maria Shahbaz was only 13 years old when she was abducted at gunpoint on 28 April 2020 and forced to convert to Islam and marry a Muslim. Her birth certificate was shown in court to prove she had been too young to marry, but her abductor submitted a fake marriage certificate giving her age as 19. Despite this, Lahore’s High Court ruled that Maria willingly converted to Islam and was legally married. Two weeks later she managed to escape and re-joined her own family. She has begun legal proceedings to overturn her forced marriage and forced conversion.

Pakistan’s notorious “blasphemy” laws are often used to make false accusations in order to settle personal grudges. 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 (Islamic law).

The “blasphemy” laws include a mandatory death penalty for defiling the name of Muhammad. Although no executions have ever been carried out, seven Christians were on death row as at October 2020 and about another 20 in prison on “blasphemy” charges. Imran Masih, sentenced to life imprisonment in January 2010, has had his appeal hearing postponed almost 70 times. Between 1990 and 2019, 15 Christians were murdered because of “blasphemy” allegations, even before their trial could be conducted in accordance with the law. Entire Christian communities have been violently targeted by Muslims following allegations.



Maria Shahbaz

Pray that the “blasphemy” laws will be repealed and those awaiting trial or execution protected and exonerated. Ask the Lord to be a “wall of fire” around Christian women and girls keeping them safe from abduction, and that the justice system will protect the innocent.

Russia

Russia, or the Russian Federation, is the largest country in the world by area. It became an independent country after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

In principle, freedom of religion is a guaranteed right under Article 28 of the Russian Constitution. But, in practice, many Russian Christians do not experience this level of religious liberty.

Since 2016, more than 1,300 cases have been brought against Christians. In the first half of 2020, at least 19 Christians were prosecuted for “illegal missionary activity”, with an average conviction rate of 92%. Most of the charges were for distributing religious literature on the street without authorisation.

The 2016 “Yarovaya Law” gives harsh penalties for vague offences and allows the authorities sweeping surveillance powers. A church in Moscow with a congregation of about 50 has had its services interrupted almost every Sunday by police, who film and take photos inside the church to identify ways in which they claim the church is violating the law.

In November 2019, Olga Glamozdinova won a landmark court case. She was fined for “use of land for unintended purposes” when she allowed church members to meet for four hours every week at her house, where the church was registered. The Russian Constitutional Court ruled in her favour,

saying that residential buildings can be used for religious worship services and religious organisations can be registered at residential premises.

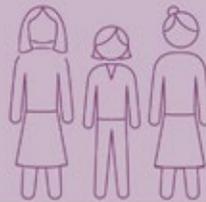
A new amendment to the law on freedom of conscience and religious association was drafted in 2020. If enacted, it will be illegal for pastors trained outside Russia to preach in a church or even conduct home Bible study groups. It calls for those trained abroad to re-train in Russia, but the government has made it difficult for Christian theological institutions to operate, with licences being revoked.



A Christian radio station that broadcasts in the troubled Caucasus region

Pray that Christians will be filled with grace and peace, responding to restrictions on their freedom of worship in a Christ-like way. Ask God to give wisdom and protection to those who share their faith with others.

Women



"... a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." (Proverbs 31:30b)

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. Islamic State auctioned women off as slaves, or "awarded" them as prizes to soldiers.

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). Pakistani Christian women working in domestic service for Muslim families run the risk of abuse and exploitation. Both as they travel to and from and in their workplace. Within days of taking a job as a live-in domestic servant, 18-year-old Anika was asked to convert to Islam. She kept refusing and so her employers beat her severely and accused her of stealing money.

Widows 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 can be despised and rejected.



Arusyak has been alone since childhood and was raised in an orphanage in Armenia. The Christian community are her relatives. In these hard Covid times, she needed special support. When she received a food package from Barnabas Fund, she was astonished and said, "I thought I was going to lock myself up inside my house because of the pandemic, like Elijah did in the cave, meanwhile you brought bread and food to feed me. God is the same. His mercy is the same."

Lift up Christian women and girls living in contexts of marginalisation and persecution. Pray that God will provide for them and comfort all who mourn and are lonely. Pray that the vulnerable will be protected from those who seek to harm them because of their faith and gender.

Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, it is a capital offence for a Muslim to leave their Islamic religion. No Saudi Christian convert from Islam is known to have been executed in recent times, but some have been murdered by their families. An unknown number of indigenous believers must follow Christ in total secrecy.

Christian migrant workers often face abuse from their employers in Saudi Arabia. No public indication of any non-Islamic religion is allowed, but expatriate Christians are, theoretically, allowed to gather privately to worship, but can experience harassment from religious police who raid meetings. In 2019, Saudi Arabia opened its doors to tourists, 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. However, Saudi Arabia's top court announced in 2020 that flogging will cease to be a form of criminal punishment. This was immensely significant as Islam teaches that Allah laid down the penalty of flogging for drinking alcohol and adultery.

Blasphemy carries a potential death penalty, and charges of blasphemy suppress free speech and debate, including on social media. Terrorism is

defined in law as "calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based." In 2020 Saudi Arabia's call to the UN to define "Islamophobia" as a type of racism raised an alarm for global religious freedom.

Saudi Arabia propagates its strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam worldwide and has provided massive financial support to Islamist groups in other nations. Various networks funnel its oil money into *dawa* (Islamic mission) projects across the world.



Church building, probably fourth century, discovered in the 1980s near Jubail

Pray for the protection of all Christians. Give thanks for some small moves towards a more lenient interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia and pray that this will be expanded to allow Muslims to choose to follow another religion if they want, without penalty.

Somalia



Somalia is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian. There are no church buildings in this country, which is almost 100% Muslim.

The tiny Christian community, made up almost entirely of converts from Islam, faces great pressure and violence. Many have been murdered for apostasy by family, community members or Al Shabaab jihadists.

Islam is a major part of Somali national identity. Article 2 of the 2012 provisional constitution declares Islam to be the state religion, and no law can be enacted that is not compliant with the general principles and objectives of sharia. Promoting any religion apart from Islam is illegal.

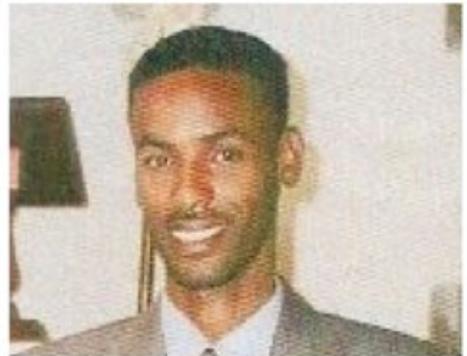
Somalia has been ravaged by conflict since 1991, when rival warlords began fighting for control. This has resulted in a Somali diaspora estimated at almost two million, many in Kenya.

In 1991 the self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland asserted its independence from the rest of Somalia. Though not internationally recognised, it has experienced relative stability. Islam is its official religion and the constitution prohibits Muslims from converting to another religion. In 2020 a Christian couple were arrested for being apostates and evangelists.

In 2006 Islamist militant group Al Shabaab (meaning “the Youth”), with links to Al Qaeda, began waging an insurgency against the Somali

government. Despite international efforts, spearheaded by the African Union, to defeat Al Shabaab, it still holds swathes of territory.

Al Shabaab 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. Al Shabaab hunts down and kills Somali converts to Christianity.



David Abdulwahab Mohamed Ali (29) was one of four Muslim converts to Christianity who were murdered by Al Shabaab in a six-month period in 2008

Pray that Somali Christians, who face the strong possibility of violence, even death, for their faith in Jesus, will find protection under the shadow of the Almighty. Ask God to bring peace to conflict-racked Somalia and freedom to its people.

Sri Lanka

Christians in Sri Lanka are found amongst both the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority ethnic groups. Buddhism, the religion followed by most Sinhalese, is dominant. The Christian community includes families who have been Christian for generations as well as new converts from Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Many Christians are very poor. They are harassed and attacked by Buddhist extremists, often led by monks, and their church services disrupted.

On Easter Sunday 2019 Islamic State (IS) suicide bombers carried out coordinated attacks against three churches and three hotels, killing at least 254 people, mostly Sri Lankan Christians (who make up just 8% of the island's population).

Buddhist hardliner Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the presidential election in November 2019 and a landslide victory in the general election in August 2020, opening the door to a law criminalising conversions, something Buddhist nationalists have been wanting for many years. At a Buddhist convention in February 2020, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, brother of the president, identified the conversion of "traditional Buddhist families to other religions" as one of the greatest threats facing Sri Lanka.

Intolerance is growing. July 2020 saw two attacks on churches. A house church in Batticaloa was attacked, the pastor and congregation beaten, by a

40-strong mob of Hindu extremists and a petrol bomb was thrown onto the roof of a church in Uva province. In October another Christian place of worship was destroyed.

Radical Muslims are pressuring both Christian and Hindu Tamils in the east to convert to Islam. At least ten Tamil villages are now 100% Muslim and have new Arab names. Tamils, who make up 14% of Sri Lanka's population, are mostly Hindus. The three-decade civil war, which ended in 2009, is still a bitter memory for the defeated Tamils, who are oppressed and disadvantaged in many ways by the Sinhala-dominated authorities.



Barnabas has helped with the cost of church buildings for poor and persecuted believers

Ask that hostility and injustice towards Christians will cease and they will be able to worship without danger. Pray for unity amongst the Christians despite their diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Sudan

Sudan has seen dramatic changes since a military coup in April 2019 ousted Omar al-Bashir's Islamist government and established a Transitional Military Council (TMC) instead. Under al-Bashir, the Christian minority (estimated at 3%) had suffered fierce persecution.

On 3 September 2020, Sudan agreed to separate religion and state and become a secular state, ending 30 years of Islamic rule and Islam as the state religion. It also declared, "Freedom of belief and worship and religious practice shall be guaranteed in full to all citizens ... No citizen shall be discriminated against based on their religion."

A few days earlier, the government had signed a peace accord with an alliance of rebel groups, ending decades of conflict in Darfur and the border states of Blue Nile and South Kordofan, including Sudan's oldest Christian region in the Nuba Mountains, which left hundreds of thousands dead and millions more displaced.

On 9 July 2020, Sudan's apostasy law, which under the 1991 Criminal Code carried a death penalty, was abolished. Sudan had been one of the few countries in the world with a formal death penalty for apostasy from Islam, which had been imposed and sometimes even carried out within living memory.

On the same day further reforms removed a swath of other discriminatory and repressive sharia provisions. Another positive step has been the

founding of an independent national commission for religious freedom.

Islamists have repeatedly called for the TMC to be overthrown in an angry backlash against the reforms which move Sudan away from its previous very strict form of Islam. One Islamist cleric described the TMC as waging "a war against virtues" and said that "uprooting this obscene government is a mandatory duty".



In the prison chapel. This Christian woman, originally from the Nuba Mountains, was jailed in Khartoum under sharia in 2019 and her baby was born in prison. They are now released and reunited with family

Give thanks to God for the government's brave and decisive action in reforming the law. Pray for the protection of government ministers responsible for this and that calls for a return to a stricter Islam will not be heeded.

Syria

After a decade of civil war, the faith of Christians has been tested by many tribulations. The rise of Islamist militant groups, including Islamic State, fuelled violent anti-Christian persecution on top of the terrible war that all Syrians endured. While Western media largely focused on the Syrian army's war against the rebels, Christians were targets of kidnappings and murders at the hands of Islamist rebel groups.

Many Christians have lost loved ones – some of whom were martyred for their faith. Faced with gruelling hardship, cut off from all help by sanctions, some now struggle with depression. Food and medicine shortages, bombed-out homes, lack of employment opportunities are just some of the difficulties they endure in parts of the country. Additionally in 2020, wildfires devastated forests and olive groves and several church ministers died as Covid-19 rampaged through the population.

Syria's north-eastern Hassake Governorate is home to tens of thousands of mostly Assyrian and Armenian Christians. In 2019, Turkish troops and Islamist jihadists advanced into this area insisting there would be "no room for Christians". One of their weapons has been water. In August 2020, in the midst of the scorching summer heat, airstrikes on the Alok pumping station, deprived many residents of water for weeks.

Before the civil war, around 10% of Syria's 22 million population was Christian. Many were descendants of survivors of the Armenian genocide perpetuated by the Ottoman Turkish government, which peaked in 1915. Unusually for a Muslim-majority country, Christians in Syria had enjoyed respect and equality until the rise of Islamist groups during the civil war.

Huge numbers of Syrian Christians have fled their country since the civil war began in 2011, but have often faced discrimination and sometimes violence in the countries where they found themselves.



Syrian Christian boy with new warm winter clothes provided by Barnabas

Pray that Christians forced to flee north-east Syria will find safety and a new home. 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 over 90% and is one of the most religiously conservative, as well as poorest, of the Central Asian countries. Islamism is on the rise and it is a difficult place for the small Christian population.

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.

Converts from Islam are persecuted by authorities and often subjected to violence from their relatives, or threatened with death.

The “extremism law” (Criminal Code article 189) is used to crack down 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. Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov served nearly three years in prison, having been found guilty of “singing extremist songs in church and so inciting religious hatred”.

Only one church has managed to gain registration in the last decade, even though the minimum requirement is only ten members. Since 2018 all religious activities must be reported to the state. The import and distribution of religious publications must be approved by the authorities. Between August 2019 and January 2020, four

church leaders were given huge fines for arranging a translation of the Bible into modern Tajik.

Tens of 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.

A census taken in October 2020 included a question about religion, for the first time since 1937, when Tajikistan was part of the Stalin-led Soviet Union. There are fears that this will be used to track down Christians (Forum 18).



Key pastors attend a church leadership conference supported by Barnabas

Ask the Lord to uphold Christians facing increasingly restrictive laws. Pray that authorities will relent in their harassment of Christians. Pray for Christian children banned by law from attending church.

Converts



"... the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:45-46)

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 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, for example in Iran, it is even officially punishable by death, although this is rarely enforced and converts are more likely to be imprisoned.

Converts from Hinduism and Buddhism also tend to face rejection, hostility and violence, as do converts from traditional African religions and animistic beliefs in south-east Asia. Many are cast out from their homes and villages.



When a very poor Christian man, the first convert in his family, became sick and died, the village chief refused to let him be buried in the village, thinking it would anger the spirits that the non-Christian villagers worshipped. The Christians had to carry the body far away for burial in the jungle

Give thanks to the Lord for new converts who willingly take up their cross to follow Jesus, 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.

Tunisia



Compared to other countries in the Maghreb region, Tunisia (98% Muslim) is relatively open, and even the Islamists are considered more “reasonable” than those of other North African countries. The 2014 post-Arab Spring constitution guarantees freedom of religion. It describes Islam as the religion of the state but not its source of legislation. However, sharia (Islamic law) has a significant place within family law.

A coalition government, established at the end of February 2020, includes Ennahda (Tunisia’s Islamist political party). About a fifth of Tunisian Muslims dress in a conservative Islamic way, but many others are questioning Islam.

The Tunisian Ministry of Religion has a Muslim section, headed by an imam, and a Jewish section, headed by a rabbi, but nothing for Christians (even though they are more numerous than Jews in Tunisia).

The Christian community is mainly expatriates, especially from Africa, but also includes some Tunisian converts from Islam and their children. Historic churches with foreign links are in a relatively strong position legally. Local Tunisian churches are not prevented from functioning but have no legal status so cannot own property. Converts from Islam are stigmatised by the majority Muslim community and may be rejected by Muslim relatives.

From the first century until the arrival of conquering Muslim armies

in 647, North Africa had a vibrant Christian community. Christianity gradually disappeared in the following centuries (except in Egypt) but its last strongholds were in what is now Tunisia, in the cities of Tunis and Nefzaoua, where there were still Christians in the fifteenth century. The Church in Tunis was even growing at this time, perhaps as the last scattered Christians from across the Maghreb gathered there.



Baptistry from the Church of Demna, near Calibiya, dates back to the sixth century, when Tunisia was mainly Christian. It is dedicated to Cyprian who died as a martyr in 258 AD in Carthage

Pray that Muslim-background Christians will have opportunities and courage to meet with others and build up their faith. Ask that the position of all churches may be properly recognised.

Turkey



Turkey vies with Saudi Arabia for leadership of the Sunni Muslim world. Its Islamist president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is increasingly open about his ambitions to spread Turkish Islamic influence, as if to re-establish the Ottoman Empire. Repression of religious minorities, fuelled by “hate speech” by the government, is increasing in Turkey, which is at least 99% Muslim.

In the summer of 2020, President Erdogan ordered two historic buildings in Istanbul, originally Christian churches, then mosques, and latterly museums, to be turned back into mosques. Just a month after the controversial repurposing of the world famous Hagia Sophia, nearby St Saviour Church was ordered to be turned back into a functioning mosque.

The tiny remnant 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. Before the genocide, Christians had constituted an estimated 20% of the population of Turkey, a country in whose territory were located the seven churches of Revelation (chapters 2 and 3).

Despite the fact that Turkey has been a secular state since 1928, the Christian community, now swollen by refugees from Syria, Iraq, Iran and

even Afghanistan, has continued to be treated as inferior to the Muslim majority (as in classical Islam and the days of the Ottoman Empire). Since 2019, it has become increasingly difficult for overseas church workers serving in Turkey to be granted visas.

On 27 September 2020, fierce fighting erupted between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces over Nagorno-Karabakh, a Christian ethnic-Armenian enclave inside Muslim Azerbaijan. Turkey immediately expressed its support for Azerbaijan and sent hundreds of Turkey-backed Syrian mercenaries to Azerbaijan.



Some original Christian paintings of crosses are still visible on the ceiling of Hagia Sofia despite later Islamic decoration

Pray for Christians in Turkey who live in a growing climate of repression and hostility, especially converts and refugees. Ask the Lord to bring an end to President Erdogan’s plans of recreating the Ottoman Empire and that “hate speech” would be replaced with the Word that brings life.

Turkmenistan



All aspects of public life in Turkmenistan are under strict government control. Its citizens have little access to the internet, their movements are controlled by the authorities, their spending monitored and they must not be out after 11 p.m. For Christians the pressures are even greater. Police monitor church activities, raid Christian homes and harass and arrest Christians, particularly church leaders.

Religious meetings in private homes are banned. There are just 20 registered churches – the only places where it is legal for Christians to meet. In 2016, all state-registered religious communities had to apply for re-registration. The previous requirement of five adult members was increased to 50. Churches find it almost impossible to get registration. Christians are not only isolated from believers outside this very closed country but also the various Christian groups inside Turkmenistan have little contact with each other.

The religious context is dominated by Islam and a pervasive presidential personality cult, first established by former President Niyazov and continued under President Berdymukhamedov, who can remain president for life. Ethnic Turkmens, whose identity is bound up with Islam, account for around 80% of the population.

Christianity in the region dates back to the third century and about 9% of the population are Russian Orthodox

Christians. There is a small, growing community of Muslim-background believers, who are normally rejected by their family and will often lose their job, be removed from any public office and come under intense pressure to return to Islam. Yet they are full of joy and have a great thirst for the Word of God and the leaders long for training and equipping for ministry.

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. Christianity is associated with negative foreign influences.



Barnabas provided food aid to 105 Christian families in Turkmenistan during Covid-19 pandemic

Ask the Lord to sustain and equip isolated and hard-pressed Christians, especially converts from Islam. Pray that more churches can register and function legally, and Bibles can be circulated more freely.

Uzbekistan



For many years officially secular Uzbekistan, whose population is mainly 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 2019, a historic breakthrough saw several churches registered, including one in the notoriously strict, autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, and at least a further eight churches were registered in 2020. Church registration had previously been very difficult to obtain.

The year 2019 also saw an end to raids on activities by unregistered churches. However, Christians were disappointed in August 2020 when the government unveiled its draft new Religion Law. Virtually all the oppressive measures integral to the 1998 law were retained in the 2020 draft.

All religious activity outside state-approved, registered organisations, and without permission from the authorities, remains “illegal”. But the number of adult members required for a church to apply for official registration (so its activities are legal) has been reduced from the current 100 to 50. The draft text upholds the compulsory prior censorship of religious literature and article 11 bans “any forms of missionary activity and proselytism capable of destroying inter-religious accord and religious tolerance in society”. There is a new

requirement for church leaders to receive theological training.

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 and Islamist extremists.

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.



Barnabas helped these Muslim-background believers to open a café. It is hard for converts to get employment

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

Martyrs



“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.” (Revelation 2:10b)

Radical jihadists believe that they are pleasing Allah by killing non-Muslims. Christian converts from other religions risk being killed, by relatives, the community or Islamist militants. Some governments target Christians, especially converts from Islam; they can be punished under various pretexts or occasionally sentenced to death for apostasy. We do not always know the names of these increasingly numerous martyrs; but they are known by their Lord.

Many families lose their only breadwinner when a husband or father is martyred. Yet with remarkable grace they forgive the killers of their loved ones. “My prayer is that his killers will get to know this Jesus I know. I do forgive them and will pray that the Lord saves their souls,” said Rose (27) the day after her husband, Pastor Matthew Tagwi, had been killed by Fulani militants in Nigeria. The couple had two young daughters, Esther (6) and Joy (2), and Rose was pregnant at the time. She plans to continue the work to which they were both called by God.

Christians can even be killed while in police custody. Jeyaraj (59) and his son Emmanuel (31) were beaten to death by Indian police and Hindu extremists in June 2020. Others die from injuries inflicted on them because

of their faith. Pakistani Christian Saleem Masih (22) died in February 2020, after he was tortured for having washed at a Muslim farmer’s well.



Samaru Madkami, 14, a convert to Christianity, who was passionate about sharing his faith, was murdered in his village in Odisha, in June 2020 by a group of extremists

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. Ask that their sacrifice will embolden others to endure and be a powerful witness to their killers. Ask that the Lord will comfort those left behind and give them His peace that passes all understanding.

Vietnam

The communist, one-party state in Vietnam views any religion with suspicion, but especially Christianity, perceiving it as “Western”. In some areas Christians are treated well, but in others face arbitrary arrest, brutal police treatment and jail.

The 2018 Law on Belief and Religion requires authorities to protect religious freedom, but bans 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 – more than half of Vietnamese Christians – experience the worst persecution. The Hmong people (living mainly in the North-west Highlands) are discriminated against in higher education and civil service jobs. Christians are sometimes forced out of villages and farmlands. However, in 2020 plans were announced by a local government in Lam Dong Province to resettle 79 Hmong Christian households who had been evicted from their villages, including providing a road, community centre and clinic. It was also announced that the Christians would be helped to get household registration and national IDs so they could access education and health care.

The Montagnard people, from the Central Highlands, have endured decades of persecution for their Christian faith. Authorities raid or close

down house churches and try to force Christians to deny Christ. A 2019 report estimated that 10,000 Montagnards were stateless because local authorities refused to issue ID cards, household registration or birth certificates.

Montagnard Christian Y Ngun Khul was released in March 2020, in poor health and bearing scars from beatings, after almost 16 years in prison. His family lost their home and land and were only able to visit him four times. Pastor A Dao was released in September after four years behind bars. Both had been imprisoned for their calls for religious freedom for the Christian Montagnard community.



Pastor A Dao was held in poor conditions and even tortured during his four-year imprisonment

Give thanks for the planned resettlement of Hmong Christians and pray that this will be fulfilled. Ask for an end to the persecution of Christians and for greater religious freedom. Pray that Christians will stand firm in the faith and those imprisoned will experience full restoration.

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 and His victory over sin and death. The death of Jesus on the cross, when He bore the sins of the world, was not the end of the story. It was the beginning of God's rescue plan that through the death and resurrection of this one Perfect Man all who believe in Him would have everlasting life.

We can cling to this wondrous hope that goes beyond the grave, no matter what we are going through in this life. Christ's resurrection assures us, and our brothers and sisters enduring persecution for His sake, that our sufferings are only temporary and that they are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. No matter what we have to endure now, our troubles will seem light and momentary in comparison with the glory that is to come. (2 Corinthians 4:17)

As the Word of God promises,

"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

(James 1:12)



"Turning to the Lord should be our first response, not our last resort," says Mahato, who works at a Bible college in India. He proclaimed "Jesus" in the midst of the uncertainty of the Covid-19 crisis

Praise God for the hope we have, that all who are in Christ have already been made alive with Him 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 of the Holy Spirit and the resurrection power of the Lord Jesus Christ.



Practical help for persecuted Christians

Thank you for your prayers for the persecuted Church.

Praying is the most important thing we can do to help our suffering brothers and sisters. But if you would also like to send them practical help, you will find details on the tear-out form opposite of how you could send a gift to Barnabas Fund. We will forward your gift to places where Christians live with pressure, harassment and violence so that it can be used to fund Christian-run projects that help needy and persecuted Christians.

We greatly welcome donations to our General Fund, which we can use wherever the need is greatest or most urgent, and for projects we cannot publicise because they are too sensitive or for other reasons.

However, if you would like to direct your gift more specifically, here are some suggestions:

Feeding Fund (reference 00-636)

Victims of Violence Fund (reference 00-345)

Small Business Start-ups and Self-Sufficiency Fund (reference 00-356)

Vocational Training Fund (reference PR1535)

Christian Schools for Christian Children (reference 00-794)

Convert Fund (reference 00-113)

Leadership Training Fund (reference 00-430)

Bibles and Scriptures Fund (reference 00-362)

Resources Fund (reference 00-479)

Disaster Relief Fund (reference 00-634)

or

General Fund – to be used where most needed – (reference 00-000)

For more information, please visit barnabasfund.org or call your nearest Barnabas Fund office (contact details on back cover).

LIVING
STREAMS

Living Streams Sponsorship

We have sponsorship programmes available for regular donations to certain kinds of project. Please contact your nearest Barnabas Fund office for details.



Yes, I would like to help persecuted Christians

Please return this form to Barnabas Fund at your national office or to the UK office. Addresses are on the back cover. Barnabas Fund will not give your address, telephone number or email to anyone else.

Title	Full Name
Address	
	Postcode
Phone	
Email	

Please remember to complete the Gift Aid form below if applicable

Please use my gift for: (Mark your preference)*

- Wherever the need is the greatest (General Fund)
- Other (give reference number of project to be supported)

I do not require an acknowledgement of this gift

Here is my single gift of: £25 £50 £100 £

I enclose a cheque/voucher payable to "Barnabas Fund"

OR Please debit my Visa Mastercard American Express

   **CAF** CAF card /other charity card Other

Card Number

Expiry date / Signature

giftaid it **Gift Aid Declaration** (Applicable to UK taxpayers only) Boost your donation by 25p of Gift Aid for every £1 you donate

Gift Aid is reclaimed by the charity from the tax you pay for the current tax year. **Your address is needed to identify you as a current UK taxpayer, please fill this in below if different from the details above.**

In order to Gift Aid your donation you must mark the box below:

I want to Gift Aid this donation and any donations I make in the future or have made in the past to: **Barnabas Fund**. I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference.

Title	Full Name
Full Home Address	
	Postcode

Please notify Barnabas Fund if your circumstances change.

If you pay Income Tax at the higher or additional rate and want to receive the additional tax relief due to you, you must include all your Gift Aid donations on your Self-Assessment tax return or ask HM Revenue and Customs to adjust your tax code.

*If the project is sufficiently funded, we reserve the right to use designated gifts either for another project of a similar type or for another project in the same country.

Lent prayer diary

For those who are using this prayer booklet in Lent 2021, the following schedule of readings and prayers is suggested. It begins on Ash Wednesday, 17 February, and finishes on Easter Day, 4 April.

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

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