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OCTOBER 2021

BARNABAS FUND - AID AGENCY FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH - BRINGING HOPE TO SUFFERING CHRISTIANS



Suffering Church Action
and Awareness Week

SUNDAY 31 OCTOBER - SUNDAY 7 NOVEMBER
**17 PAGES OF INFORMATION AND RESOURCES
INSIDE FOR YOU AND YOUR CHURCH**



**God's
faithfulness**
in times of suffering


barnabasfund
hope and aid for the persecuted church

The Barnabas Fund Distinctive

What helps make Barnabas Fund distinctive from other Christian organisations that deal with persecution?



We work by:

- Directing our aid only to Christians, although its benefits may not be exclusive to them ("As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, **especially to those who belong to the family of believers.**" Galatians 6:10, emphasis added)
- Channelling money **from** Christians **through** Christians **to** Christians (we do not send people, we only send money)
- Channelling money through existing structures in the countries where funds are sent (e.g. local churches or Christian organisations)
- Using the money to fund projects which have been developed by local Christians in their own communities, countries or regions
- Considering any request, however small
- Acting as equal partners with the persecuted Church, whose leaders often help shape our overall direction
- Acting on behalf of the persecuted Church, to be their voice - making their needs known to Christians around the world and the injustice of their persecution known to governments and international bodies

We seek to:

- meet both practical and spiritual needs
- encourage, strengthen and enable the existing local Church and Christian

communities - so they can maintain their presence and witness rather than setting up our own structures or sending out missionaries

- tackle persecution at its root by making known the aspects of other religions and ideologies that result in injustice and oppression of Christians and others
- inform and enable Christians in the West to respond to the growing challenge of other religions and ideologies to Church, society and mission in their own countries
- facilitate global intercession for the persecuted Church by providing comprehensive prayer material
- safeguard and protect our volunteers, staff, partners and beneficiaries
- keep our overheads low

We believe:

- we are called to address both religious and secular ideologies that deny full religious liberty to Christian minorities - while continuing to show God's love to all people
- in the clear Biblical teaching that Christians should treat all people of all faiths with love and compassion, even those who seek to persecute them
- in the power of prayer to change people's lives and situations, either through grace to endure or through deliverance from suffering

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40)

barnabasaid the magazine of Barnabas Fund

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Front Cover: A Christian boy in Pakistan



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Heavenly messengers

One of Scotland's best-known contemporary painters is a Christian called Nael Hanna, originally from Iraq. His God-given talent is amazing, the pictures he produces are beautiful, but for me the most wonderful thing about my friend Nael is that he has seen Jesus. Not once but three times. The first two times were in Iraq when, as a very young man, he had been seriously injured in the Iran-Iraq war and was near death. The third time was more recently, late at night at his home in Scotland. Nael was suffering terribly painful gout and cried out to Jesus to help him. Jesus appeared to him, touched and healed his foot and asked him to tell the story to others.

His last word to Nael was "Shlomo", the Aramaic word for "wholeness, peace and wellbeing". It was the same that the risen Jesus gave to His disciples.

Soon after that experience, Nael made a small sketch of Jesus, who had looked the same on each of the three occasions, with dark hair, dark eyes and white clothes. Nael decided in his heart that one day he would turn the sketch into a proper painting and after some years (and some encouragement from me) he did.

To see Jesus in this earthly life is a rare blessing. More often we will meet angels, who come as messengers from the heavenly court, sent out by the Lord to bring His words.

When Moses encountered the LORD in the burning bush at Horeb, it was actually an angel who spoke the words of God (Exodus 3:2-6). When Zechariah, the father-to-be of John the Baptist, questioned the angel who appeared to him in the temple, he was told: "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news." (Luke 1:19)

The angel who told the shepherds of the birth of the Saviour began by explaining that he was bringing them news, specifically "good news that will cause great joy" (Luke 2:10). In other words, he had been sent to them with a message. John tells us that when God gave him the revelation of Jesus Christ, He made it known to John "by sending his angel" (Revelation 1:1).

Angels can do more than convey messages from God. They can also care for us, minister to us, attend on us. Elijah, exhausted and afraid, went into the wilderness and prayed to die, but there the LORD sent an angel who not only spoke gentle words of sympathy and understanding to Elijah but also gave him food and water (1 Kings 19:1-8). Jesus Himself was cared for in the wilderness by angels, after His long fast and His great spiritual battle with Satan (Matthew 4:11). How we would love to know what they said to Him and how they helped Him.

In fact, Scripture tells us that all angels are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14). Although sent out, they remain in constant contact with their King; as Jesus said, "they always see the face of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:10).

Our world is full of these heavenly messengers, although sometimes we may not recognise them. Scripture tells us: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."

How interesting to note that this famous command is sandwiched between two others, about loving our fellow Christians, especially those who are persecuted: "Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters ... Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." (Hebrews 13:1-3)

DR PATRICK SOOKHDEO

International Director

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Campaigns update: Commonwealth meeting postponed

Two new laws in Gujarat increase pressure on Christians

INDIA

Christians and other religious minorities have launched a legal challenge against a new law which is set to increase state control of religious schools in Gujarat, India.

The Gujarat Secondary and Higher Secondary Education (Amendment) Act, which came into effect on 1 June 2021, stipulates that the appointment of teachers and head teachers will now be undertaken by a new Central Recruitment Committee rather than by the schools themselves.

The new law also stipulates that teaching appointments made by the Committee must be accepted by schools within seven days. Schools which refuse to accept appointees may be de-registered. Church leaders fear that the new law will dilute the Christian character of schools, and that this may be the first step towards religious schools coming under full state control.

The amendment also makes it illegal to persuade somebody to convert with the promise of “divine blessings”

A Gujarat anti-conversion amendment which came into effect on 15 June stipulates a sentence of up to ten years’ imprisonment for allegedly forced or fraudulent conversions undertaken through marriage, an increase from the previous maximum sentence of four years.

The amendment also makes it illegal to persuade somebody to convert with the promise of “divine blessings”. If applied rigorously this may make it illegal to tell a non-Christian that repenting and believing in Christ will bring forgiveness for sins and everlasting life.

These pressures come on top of the severe impact of Covid-19, the second wave of which has already killed more than 2,000 Indian Christian leaders. Scores of Christian ministries are in danger of closing because there is no one to lead them.

Myanmar Army continue campaign against ethnic-minority Christians

MYANMAR

Four people were killed and at least eight injured in an attack on a church in Loikaw, Kayah State, Myanmar, on Sunday 23 May.

The Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) launched artillery and used small arms in their offensive against the church. The building was full of civilians, mainly women and children, taking shelter from ongoing fighting.

“They were not armed,” said church leaders in Myanmar, “they were inside the church to protect their families.”

The Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) launched artillery and used small arms in their offensive against the church

On 5 June around 5,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Christian-majority Chin State were again forced to flee after artillery strikes against IDP camps. The camps and nearby villages were sheltering thousands who were first displaced after a Tatmadaw offensive in the region on 12 May.

An official from one of the IDP camps explained that “there are only a few areas left for IDPs to flee to”.

On 28 June three pastors from Christian-majority Kachin State were arrested for organising prayers for peace.

Armed men kill 15 at baptism in Burkina Faso

BURKINA FASO

Armed men, suspected to be jihadi militants, attacked a baptism ceremony in the village of Adjarara, Oudalan province, Burkina Faso on 18 May, killing 15 people.

Many others fled the village, located in mainly Christian northern Burkina Faso near the border with Mali.

Scores of students kidnapped from Nigerian Christian school as anti-Christian violence continues

NIGERIA



The body of church minister Alphonsus Bello was found the morning after he was kidnapped by gunmen. A Barnabas contact reported, “This was not a random attack. The church was the target.”

Around 120 students were kidnapped when gunmen stormed a Christian boarding school in Kaduna State, Nigeria. As details of the kidnapping emerged, parents gathered at the school to pray for the safe release of the children. At the time of writing 28 have been released, five have escaped, and one was freed due to ill health.

Eight Christians were killed in an attack on 19 May conducted by armed bandits in Ungwan Gaida, also in Kaduna. The attackers burned down a church building and several homes.

In a separate incident a church minister was killed and another abducted by gunmen in a targeted attack on a church in north-central Katsina State, on 20 May.

The body of Alphonsus Bello, 33, was found in farmland near the church training school in Malunfashi on the morning following the abduction. Retired church minister Joe Keke, 75, was held for two weeks before being released.

Official churches among those affected by Chinese social media clampdown

CHINA



The WeChat page of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary was among those to be suspended "Nanjing Union Theological Seminary" by 猫猫的日记本 is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

China has continued its crackdown on Christian social media content, with the accounts of a number of churches and Christian ministries removed from social media platform WeChat on 7 June.

These include registered churches which are part of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), China's officially recognised Protestant body. In addition, the WeChat page of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary – a prominent Protestant seminary – has been suspended.

The WeChat page of 9Marks, an international ministry which provides resources for pastors and

church leaders, as well as that of the newspaper *Faith Weekly*, has also been closed down. The same appears to have happened to several Christian book publishers.

This continues a process begun in April and May when several other Christian accounts were removed from WeChat, while Christian search terms such as "Christ", "Bible" and "Gospel" were also blocked.

WeChat is China's main social media platform, used for sharing written content as well as photos and videos in a manner similar to Facebook or Twitter, and as a messaging service similar to WhatsApp.

Three churches in Algeria once again forced to close

ALGERIA

Three churches in the Oran area of Algeria have been closed again in a long-running legal battle which began in 2017.

On Sunday 4 July the administrative court of Oran ordered that the churches should be closed, and three days later each church building was sealed.

The churches were first ordered to close by the governor of Oran Province in 2017 and 2018, but all

had re-opened by the end of 2018. The court decision is the result of a case filed by the governor in August 2019 seeking to force the churches' closure.

The three churches are among at least 20 which have been closed since late 2017, most of which remain sealed. In May, however, a historic church building in the port city of Mostaganem which had been appropriated by a local authority, was returned to the Church.

Christian couple acquitted of "blasphemy" charges in Pakistan

PAKISTAN



Acquitted at last. Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar had been on death row since their conviction for "blasphemy" in 2014

A Christian couple who have been on death row in Pakistan since being convicted of "blasphemy" in 2014 have been acquitted of all charges in an appeal hearing at Lahore High Court.

Shafqat Emmanuel and his wife Shagufta Kausar ... were accused of sending blasphemous text messages, despite the fact that both are illiterate

Shafqat Emmanuel and his wife Shagufta Kausar (also known as Shagufta Masih) were accused of sending blasphemous text messages, despite the fact that both are illiterate.

The couple, who have always denied the charges against them, were sentenced to death in April 2014 under Section 295-C of Pakistan's Penal Code which, since a constitutional court decision in 1991, has stipulated a mandatory death sentence for "derogatory remarks" against Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.



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how barnabas is helping

Christian school for Sudanese refugees transformed by renovation work

Hundreds of Sudanese Christian refugee children are enjoying lessons in a safer and brighter new-look school, thanks to a major renovation project supported by Barnabas.

The Christian school is located in a poor area of Egypt's capital Cairo, in a six-storey former apartment block that needed urgent structural repair. A Christian team of architects and contractors carried out an extensive refurbishment and the building was rewired, replumbed and reconfigured to maximise space. "This 'new' school is ever so much nicer than we had dreamed of," said a school leader.

The school recently bought the building, which it had rented for more than ten years, and educates about 300 children who fled persecution and conflict in North and South Sudan. Many of the children's fathers are either dead or in another country. Without this Christian school, the children would have little opportunity of an education. The majority of staff are Sudanese who teach in both English and Arabic.



Sudanese refugee children are delighted with their new classrooms

£90,350 (\$124,470; €104,970)

Project reference: 11-1203

Joy and relief as Barnabas rebuilds churches razed in southern Ethiopia

Christians displaced by conflict in southern Ethiopia are able to worship again as a community after Barnabas rebuilt five churches. The buildings were among more than 120 churches destroyed in a conflict in the Gedeo-Guji region over three years ago causing hundreds of thousands to flee.

Families are now returning to the ruins of their farms and homes and are attempting to pick up the pieces of their lives; however, the destruction that they found has taken an emotional and psychological toll. The returning farmers, reliant on seasonal cash crops, had no money to contribute to the rebuilding of their churches and congregations were worshipping in the open air.

Not only is it a great relief and joy for Christians to be able to worship together again under one roof, but the churches are important community centres.

Barnabas has also sent food and other essential aid to Christians fleeing conflict in Tigray, northern Ethiopia.



One of the five churches that Barnabas rebuilt

£10,700 (\$14,720; €12,400)

Project reference: 13-659
(Victims of Violence in Ethiopia)

New enterprise in Egypt provides jobs and help for Christians in need

A Christian carpentry workshop, whose set-up costs were mostly funded by Barnabas, is providing jobs for young Christians in the Nile Delta region, while profits from the business are helping other Christians in need.

The new venture is in a poor village where youth unemployment is high. It provides jobs for six workers and harnesses the carpentry skills they learned at technical school. The business also serves local needs by making reasonably priced furniture for villagers and for church projects locally.

Within a short time of opening, the workshop had made a profit. This money was used by the local church to provide oxygen tanks for a Covid patient, to pay the school fees of two girls to enable them to sit their final exams, and to set up a small fruit and vegetable kiosk to enable a newly widowed woman to earn an income.



The carpentry workshop provides jobs and help for Christians

£12,330 (\$16,990; €14,320)

Project reference: 11-226
(Small business start-ups in Egypt)

Compassion in action

Strengthened and encouraged. This is what we often hear from Christians who have received support from Barnabas Fund. Thank you for making this possible. Here are just a few examples of the many ways we have recently helped persecuted and pressurised Christians.

Barnabas helps 50 Pakistani brick-kiln workers to set up own businesses

Barnabas provided the set-up costs for 50 impoverished Pakistani Christians, freed from bondage as brick-kiln workers, to start their own businesses and help them towards self-sufficiency.

Ghufar was burdened with a debt he inherited from his parents and couldn't afford to send his two children to school regularly. We provided him with a loader rickshaw to work for himself as delivery driver, enabling him to earn enough to meet his bills and give his children a better education.

Ashfaq has worked in a brick kiln since childhood but he longed to run a grocery store. We enabled him to open the shop, which his wife helps him to manage, while he continues to work at the brick kiln, now getting his full wages because his debt is paid.

Others started businesses using donkeys and carts we provided, some received motorcycle rickshaws to carry passengers, others were given goats or livestock and sold the milk from the animals.



Ghufar with his family. He now delivers in the loader rickshaw the bricks he used to make

£29,645 (\$40,955; €34,525)
for 50 business start-ups

Project reference: PR1532

Christians thank God for food aid as second Covid wave grips India

"All the money has been spent," said Jonas, whose family suffered both physically and financially from the second deadly wave of Covid-19 sweeping India. "We did not have any ration or money and when this help reached us we thanked God for His faithfulness through you."

It was the same story for Sanjhala who was down to her last bag of rice. "I didn't know how to provide for my family," she said. "When I got this food parcel I was so happy and praised God."

Jonas and Sanjhala are among around 51,000 poor Christians in desperate need in India who have been nourished by Barnabas food parcels containing essentials such as rice, flour, lentils and oil during the second wave. A project partner said the food relief helped people physically, mentally and spiritually. "Everyone is in fear and anxiety, but this food relief brought smiles to their faces and some hope for the future," he added.



Sanjhala almost despaired of being able to feed her children

£115,260 (\$159,900; €135,150) for food aid during India's second wave of Covid-19 (May - August 2021)

Project reference: PR1530
(Covid Emergency Fund)

Translation of New Testament enables Christians in Central Asia to grow in Lord

Christians living in an impoverished Muslim-majority country in Central Asia can now understand the Word of God in their native language and grow in faith, thanks to a recently completed translation of the New Testament, which Barnabas provided funding to print.

The previous translation was difficult for most people to understand, even Christians who had been believers for decades. "We wanted to make the Bible text simpler and more comprehensible," said one of the translators. "Our new text can be grasped even by school children."

Pastors, many of whom lack a theological education, said the translation allowed them to gain new and important knowledge. One said it helped him to understand Revelation and Paul's Epistles, which previously seemed "dark".

Barnabas printed 3,000 copies of the translated New Testament, which will enable poor Christian communities who otherwise would have no access to the printed Word, to grow in faith, and bring new converts to the Lord.



Members of the translation team hard at work

£10,000 (\$13,810; €11,700) for printing, delivery and other publishing expenses

Project reference: 00-362
(Bibles and Scriptures Fund)



We were delighted to receive our first food.gives donation, from a church congregation in Shirehampton, Bristol

food.gives...
the journey so far

Hundreds sign up to support new **Barnabas Food Boxes** initiative helping hungry, poor and persecuted Christians

Since its live launch in the UK on 12 June 2021, food.gives has seen hundreds of our supporters commit to this new Barnabas initiative to help hungry, poor and persecuted Christians around the world. Many supporters have requested a monthly supply of food boxes to fill, some have stepped forward to represent their church, school or group to organise the gathering of food donations, while others have volunteered to help at our warehouse in Swindon, Wiltshire, or undertake other vital tasks behind the scenes.

Vision set out in words of Jesus

We have begun to receive donations of non-perishable food at our warehouse, and we continue sending out our Starter Packs to supporters keen to take part in the initiative. We have been greatly encouraged by the enthusiasm and eager participation of those who have caught hold of the vision set out in Mark 6:37 where Jesus instructs his disciples, "You give them something to eat."

We are blessed by experienced and skilled volunteers

Other volunteers have signed up to start packing food at the warehouse ready for delivery to our brothers and sisters in need. Some have very kindly volunteered to pick up filled food boxes and drive many miles to deliver them directly to us. We are delighted that we can partner with you and be blessed by the sharing of experience and skills you bring to make this work possible.



food.gives ePap distribution in Mozambique

Harvest festival

We are particularly excited about the opportunity presented to us at Harvest Festival this autumn. What better way to share what God has blessed us with here in the UK with those in very real need? If this is something your church would like to get involved in, simply sign up on the food.gives website and we'll get a church collection box out to you!

Join us in filling food.gives boxes for hungry Christians

Will you join others who are filling up their food boxes in their homes and churches across the UK with food that will travel thousands of miles to Christians in destinations across the world who need our help?

Please visit www.food.gives to see how you can help by committing to put together a monthly food box as an individual or as a family; and/or you can be a representative of food.gives in your church, encouraging your church family to donate to your global Christian family. You can also get involved by volunteering at our Swindon warehouse or driving to pick up boxes for delivery.

SCAAW Resources

God's faithfulness

in times of suffering



SUFFERING CHURCH ACTION
AND AWARENESS WEEK

SUNDAY 31 OCTOBER
SUNDAY 7 NOVEMBER

The Bible is rich in references to the faithfulness of God. In Deuteronomy the now aged Moses assures the Israelites that "the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations" (7:9). Later he counsels them not to be afraid for "the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6).

These words bring huge comfort in troubled times of Covid, conflict and chaos caused by natural disaster, which have added terribly to the suffering of our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. Because of their faith, many Christians are marginalised, discriminated against, attacked or even killed. Suffering Church Action and Awareness Week (SCAAW) is an opportunity for us to stand alongside our afflicted global Church family, make known their situation and demonstrate Christ's love to them in prayer and practical action.

With this special SCAAW magazine, there is a range of inspirational material for you, your prayer group and your church to raise awareness during SCAAW of the plight of Christians suffering in the name of Jesus. We have suggested making SCAAW run from 31 October to 7 November, but these resources can be used at any time that suits your church's calendar.

Here is a guide to what resources are available within this magazine, online at barnabasfund.org/scaaw or to be ordered from your local Barnabas office (details on inside front cover). All are available free of charge in the quantities you need. You can also request extra copies of this magazine.

Persecution explained

Hard Pressed on Every Side – An overview of the 8 main pressures facing persecuted Christians today. Turn to p10 or download from barnabasfund.org/scaaw

SCAAW overview video – To encourage your church or group to get involved. Available at barnabasfund.org/scaaw

Praying for the Persecuted Church – Booklet covering 39 countries where Christians experience discrimination, harassment or violence. Download at barnabasfund.org/scaaw or printed copies available from your local Barnabas office.

For your Bible study group, prayer group or personal devotions

Small group Bible study – A thought-provoking Bible study on Isaiah 40:1-11. Turn to p22 or download from barnabasfund.org/scaaw

Eight-day Devotional Booklet – To help you focus on God's faithfulness in times of suffering each day of SCAAW. Included with this magazine or from barnabasfund.org/scaaw or from your local Barnabas office.

Prayer diary – *Barnabas Prayer* will inform and inspire your prayers each day. Included with this magazine or download from barnabasfund.org/scaaw

SCAAW 2021 prayer – A special new prayer for our persecuted Church family. Turn to p24 or download from barnabasfund.org/scaaw

SCAAW prayer bookmark – To encourage you when reading or to carry with you to inspire you. Included with this magazine and available free of charge from your local Barnabas office.

For your church service or other meeting

Sermon Outline – Notes for a sermon on the theme: God's faithfulness in times of suffering (Isaiah 40:1-11). Turn to p20 or download from barnabasfund.org/scaaw

PowerPoint Sermon Outline – Main points of the sermon outline, to show at your SCAAW theme service or group meeting. Download from barnabasfund.org/scaaw

New hymn for SCAAW 2021 – *This is Our God*. Turn to p19 or download from barnabasfund.org/scaaw

Special recording of our SCAAW hymn, *This is Our God* – With images and words, which can be played before, during or after your SCAAW church service. Available at barnabasfund.org/scaaw

Six suggested songs and hymns for SCAAW – Sing out in praise of the faithfulness of our Lord. Turn to p24

Activities for young people – Puzzle and prayer challenge for children and young people. Turn to p23

Getting involved with SCAAW – More ideas for your SCAAW service, event or meeting. Turn to p24

SCAAW event poster – Turn to p25 for an A4 size poster to publicise your SCAAW event or meeting. An A3 size poster is available on request from your local Barnabas office and to download at barnabasfund.org/scaaw

Money box and Gift Aid envelopes for UK tax-payers – To encourage donations at your service or event. Available free of charge on request, in the quantities you need, from your local Barnabas office

GOVERNMENT POLICY

COMMUNITY PRESSURES

TERRORIST VIOLENCE

NATURAL DISASTERS

WAR & CONFLICT

**THE CHURCH
UNDER
PRESSURE**

DISPLACEMENT

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

GOVERNMENT SANCTIONS

Hard pressed on every side

Eight kinds of pressure facing persecuted Christians today

The Church today is under intense pressure – pressure which has only increased since the Covid-19 crisis that swept across the globe in 2020. There are many forms of persecution against Christians in today’s world. These are not isolated from one another, but overlap and interact to intensify the hardship faced by our brothers and sisters.

Top-down oppression from authorities and government policies is mounting, and bottom-up pressures from communities and rapid social change are rising. Added to these, natural disasters, regional conflict and terrorist activity overlay day-to-day ongoing discrimination and marginalisation.

War and conflict are causing Christians to flee their homes, and with displacement comes greater deprivation and often discrimination for refugees forced to leave their homelands. Natural disaster, such as flood, disease and locust plagues, can arrive on top of this to place Christians at the very margins of survival. The global Church is hemmed in on every side.

1. GOVERNMENT POLICY

An increasing source of top-down pressure on Christians is coming from government policies. Sometimes this is as a result of explicit legislation but it can also be due to the “unofficial” actions of national governments or regional/local administrations. Often it is the result of an authoritarian state’s commitment to its official ideology, whether communism, Islam, or something else.

Extreme anti-Christian policies in China and North Korea

North Korea is probably the world’s most totalitarian state. It is a place of terrible persecution under the despotic rule of President Kim Jong-un – the son of Kim Jong-il – and of strict communist control. Tens of thousands of Christians have been starved, tortured and worked to death in political labour camps, or “re-education” camps, because of their faith. The harshest and most inhumane punishments in such camps are often reserved for Christians.



Citizens of North Korea bow before giant statues of former leaders Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il in the capital city Pyongyang. Kim Il-sung established the state-propagated ideology of *Juche*, or human “self-reliance”, which is almost like a religion, along with near-worship of Kim Il-sung and his successors

China, another communist state, has grown ever more authoritarian under the rule of President Xi Jinping. In China persecution is often instigated at the level of a province or city rather than nationally, but in the knowledge that the national Communist Party authorities will approve. The governments of China and North Korea have colluded together in the persecution of Christians, with believers who have escaped over the border tortured and abused in China before being sent back to the death camps of North Korea.

A disturbing trend in recent times has been the emergence of digital technologies, such as facial-recognition software, as a tool for authoritarian persecution. Surveillance cameras were forcibly installed in churches in Jiangxi and Henan Provinces last year to monitor who attends and what is being preached. The cameras are linked to “Sharp Eyes”, a country-wide surveillance system providing total coverage “across all regions”.

Pastors must now follow strict government guidelines on sermon content and all pastors and other religious leaders are added to “a database of religious personnel” listing all those authorised by the state to perform religious ministry. Church leaders not registered in the database will not be permitted to undertake ministry.

State-sponsored military oppression in Myanmar (Burma)

Thousands of Christian villagers fled military bombardment in Karen State, **Myanmar (Burma)** on 1 February 2021, the same day as Aung San Suu Kyi’s democratically elected government was ousted from power in a military coup. A chilling Myanmar Army document, discovered a few weeks later, instructed soldiers to “punish and break down” any dissenting civilians, which would be deemed to include ethnic-minority Christians.

The deadly artillery assault on the Christian civilians in Karen came suddenly, leaving villagers only moments to escape. A week later, 212 more were



Displaced ethnic-Karen Christians in the jungle of Myanmar

displaced from another Christian village during two days of relentless shelling. By mid-March, more than 8,000 Karen people, including many Christians, had been displaced by advancing military forces in northern Karen State.

For many decades the military – also known as the Tatmadaw – committed to a Buddhist nationalist ideology have attacked Chin, Kachin and Karen Christians, as well as other religious and ethnic minorities. At the time of writing, thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain deep inside the jungle.

Regional legislation adding to pressures on Indian Christians

While the national government has said it has no plans to institute a nationwide law, anti-Christian legislation crafted by state (regional) governments is steadily increasing in **India**. Nine state governments now have anti-conversion laws, which can be – and often are – used to hinder Christian worship and ministry on a variety of pretexts.

Soon after a new anti-conversion law was passed in Uttar Pradesh in November 2020, police in the state’s Shahjahanpur district were instructed to keep a watch on Christian prayer meetings to see if there are any unlawful efforts to convert people to Christianity at such gatherings.

In March 2021, a hard-line Hindu group, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), pledged to identify missionaries carrying out allegedly “illegal” conversions in Madhya Pradesh. The VHP general secretary Milind Parande said, “Such laws for the benefit of Hindus are very important ... Religious conversion is a type of violence that needs to be stopped.”

In June 2021 an amendment to the anti-conversion law of Gujarat made it illegal to persuade somebody to convert by promising them “divine blessings”. If applied rigorously this may make it illegal to tell a non-Christian that repenting and believing in Christ will bring forgiveness for sins and everlasting life. The bill also places the burden of proof on the accused, making conviction more likely.

Armenian Christians face uncertain future in aftermath of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Thousands of Armenian Christians were killed and around 90,000 displaced when the government of Muslim-majority **Azerbaijan** waged a brief but fierce war in Nagorno-Karabakh that began in September 2020.

Azerbaijani forces, supported by **Turkey**, overran the ethnic-Armenian enclave using advanced weaponry supplied by other governments and mercenary fighters from militant Islamist groups in the Middle East to support its own troops. Some Armenians were killed by having their throats cut, just like a century ago during the Armenian Genocide. Others, both soldiers and civilians, were captured, tortured, abused and killed; at time of writing Azerbaijan is refusing to release many Armenian prisoners. Azerbaijani forces have also desecrated church buildings and other Christian sites in Nagorno-Karabakh, even after the fighting had ceased.



This family is among the hundreds of Christian families in Pakistan being supported with Barnabas Fund food aid. The husband is often too sick to work; before they started getting Barnabas food parcels, there was not enough money to send the children to school, and sometimes they all had to go to bed hungry. As well as severe poverty due to discrimination, Pakistani Christians are vulnerable to false accusations of “blasphemy”. Those accused are in danger of violent reprisals, even if they are found not guilty.

Repression of religious minorities is also increasing in Turkey, which is at least 99% Muslim. Although Turkey remains technically a secular state the Christian population, which includes a small number of converts from Islam, has continued to be treated as inferior to the Muslim majority.

State-sanctioned persecution across the world

State-sanctioned persecution of the Church is evident throughout our world. In **Saudi Arabia** it is a capital offence for Muslims to leave Islam and an unknown number of indigenous believers must follow Christ in total secrecy. Promoting any religion apart from Islam is illegal in **Somalia**. Conversion from Islam is forbidden in **Afghanistan**, the **Maldives**, **Somaliland** and **Mauritania**.

In **Morocco** conversion from Islam is not forbidden, but “enticing” conversion or proselytising – so called “shaking the faith of a Muslim” – is punishable by up to three years in prison. Similarly, in **Algeria** conversion is not criminalised, but those who evangelise Muslims risk a five-year jail sentence. Christians from a Muslim background are treated as a security threat in **Iran**, and are often tried and imprisoned.

Harsh restrictions on Christian worship and practice have also been enacted in Muslim-majority countries including **Kazakhstan**, **Kyrgyzstan** and **Tajikistan** over the last 10-15 years. Severe restrictions remain in **Turkmenistan**, and in **Uzbekistan** religious activity is still under state control despite a softening of official attitudes.

In Buddhist-majority **Sri Lanka** concerns are growing that a new law against “unethical conversions” being drafted by the re-elected government in March 2021 will bring similar pressures to those experienced in parts of India. In Hindu-majority **Nepal**, where Christianity is growing, a bill criminalising “hurting religious sentiment” that came into force in 2018 means that any Christian who shares their faith with

a Hindu or Buddhist risks a prison sentence.

The Marxist government of **Eritrea** continues to target Christians for arbitrary arrest and long-term detention in overcrowded and brutal prison conditions, often without charge. Tens of thousands of Christians have fled Eritrea. In 2002, the government outlawed all places of worship except those of only three officially recognised Christian denominations – Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran – as well as Sunni Islam. As a result many churches of other denominations were closed overnight.

In **Russia** legislative amendments in recent years have tended to erode religious freedom. Since 2016 more than 1,300 cases have been brought against Christians practising their faith. The 2016 “Yarovaya Law” gives harsh penalties for vague offences and allows the authorities sweeping surveillance powers.

2. COMMUNITY PRESSURES

In many countries where Christians are a minority population, pressure and persecution are close at hand, coming from the majority communities around them. Everyday discrimination, marginalisation and harassment are commonplace for Christians in India, Pakistan, Central Asia and many other places. For Christian converts from Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism this hostility often comes from relatives and neighbours in their former communities who reject them for following the Lord Jesus.

False accusations in Pakistan

Christians in **Pakistan** are vulnerable to false accusation by disgruntled Muslim neighbours under the country’s notorious “blasphemy” laws which, since a constitutional court decision in 1991, have stipulated a mandatory death sentence for “derogatory remarks” against Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.



In some Indian states Christians who share their faith could be reported to the authorities by members of their community. In some areas police are monitoring Christian activities

In May 2021 three Christian nurses in Lahore were accused of blasphemy, leading to Muslim members of staff occupying the hospital chapel. In April two nurses in Faisalabad were attacked by their colleagues after being accused of blasphemy; the same happened to a nurse at a Karachi hospital in January.

False accusations are often made 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 accept the testimony of Muslims over non-Muslims (in similar manner to courts formally based on sharia). At the time of writing, approximately 20 Christians are held on death row on “blasphemy” charges. Since 1990, at least 15 Christians have been murdered because of “blasphemy” allegations, often before their trial could be conducted in accordance with the law.

Violence against Christians in India

As with “blasphemy” laws in Pakistan, anti-conversion laws in **India** are frequently misused against Christians, so that they are charged with making conversions by force, fraud or allurements, when they are, in reality, engaging in genuine, lawful evangelism or even just public worship. Research has suggested that states with anti-conversion laws are more likely to see violent persecution of the Christian minority.

An Indian Christian leader explained that accusations are often “created to threaten and stop regular worship activity by intimidation”. Commenting on the troubling trend, he continued, “Christian prayer meetings that have gone on for many years without much disturbance are being targeted ... There is a pattern here and it must be exposed.”

On 31 January 2021, a mob of 30 Hindu extremists surrounded Pastor Subhash Hanok’s church in Karnataka state, India, and viciously beat him and his congregation, including women and children. When eight of the extremists burst into the Sunday service in Harohalli village they demanded the worshippers repeat the Hindu chant “Jai Shri Ram” (victory to Lord Ram, a Hindu god also called Rama). When the Christians refused, the assailants began their brutal assault.

The police did not take the Christians’ complaint against the attackers seriously and made no charges. But instead, they brought charges, including for “conversion”, against Pastor Subhash and other church members, and even pressurised the landlord of the house where the church meets to evict the congregation. Sadly this account is typical of the community pressures frequently faced by Indian believers.

Grassroots anti-Christian hostility remains in Egypt

In **Egypt** President al-Sisi and his government are very supportive of the Christian minority. They have passed laws to facilitate the registration of church buildings, they publicly affirm the Christians, and express outrage and sympathy after incidents of anti-Christian violence. This stance has also manifested as practical assistance for the Christian victims of violence and tangible steps to speed up the church registration process. Many Muslim extremists, however, remain embedded at the grassroots of society and continue to attack church buildings, Christian businesses and Christian individuals.

Christian shopkeepers Ramsis Boulos Hermina, Adel Hermina (Ramsis’ brother), and Tareq Fawzy Shenouda were stabbed and beaten when attackers armed with clubs, knives and a sword entered their shop in Alexandria in December 2020. All three men received hospital treatment, but Ramsis died from his injuries. Two brothers, both Muslim, were charged with his murder in February this year.

Christians face hostility and violence from their neighbours

The tiny Christian community in **Somalia**, which is made up mainly of Muslim-background believers, faces extreme hostility and many have been murdered for apostasy by family, community members or Al Shabaab jihadists. The Christian presence in **Libya** is composed mostly of foreign migrant workers and refugees, but there are also a small number of indigenous converts from Islam. Islamists target Christians for killing, kidnap, forceful conversion and

sale in “modern-day slave markets”. Violence against Christian refugees, who are mainly West African or Eritrean, is commonplace.

Throughout the world, those who leave Islam to follow Christ tend to be ostracised by their family and community. Converts from Islam face great hostility in **Bangladesh** and sometimes violence, especially in rural areas. Those who bring the Gospel to them are also at risk. Some Christians involved in outreach to Muslims have been murdered. In the **Comoro Islands** Muslim-background believers face government disapproval and potential arrest, but the greatest pressure comes from within the society. In more moderate **Tunisia**, the main pressure for converts also comes from being stigmatised by the majority Muslim community and rejected by relatives.

In Muslim-majority Central Asian countries, including **Tajikistan** and **Uzbekistan**, Christians, particularly converts, are often subjected to discrimination and violence from their relatives or community and sometimes threatened with death. Muslim-background believers will often lose their jobs when they decide to follow Christ.

There is a similar situation in Buddhist-majority **Laos**, in south-east Asia. In 2019 the communist government passed a law to ensure the freedom of worship and other rights of evangelical Christians, and even organised seminars across the country to make the new law known. Despite this, in remote rural areas Christians continue to be persecuted on the orders of village chiefs or local officials. In April 2021 a pastor was convicted of causing disruption by holding Christian services. Thankfully the pastor, who refused to renounce his faith, was released three days later.

3. TERRORIST VIOLENCE

Terrorist violence from militant groups rages on in many regions of the world. In northern Nigeria, and with violence spilling out into neighbouring countries in recent years, thousands of Christian lives have been lost in a rising tide of murderous attacks, kidnappings and brutality by extremist Islamist terror groups armed with weapons smuggled from countries such as Algeria and Libya.

“Christian genocide” in Nigeria

Violence from Islamic extremists has grown worse in **Nigeria**, with Christians often the target. In April 2021 the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) warned of a “Christian genocide” if the government of Nigeria cannot protect Christians from Islamist terrorism.

The Islamist militant group Boko Haram, which originated in north-east Nigeria in 2002, has killed countless thousands. One of its main targets are Christians, as it seeks to “cleanse” the territory it controls of all Christians as part of its stated aim to establish a caliphate. Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram, died in May 2021, but Islamism remains rife in Nigeria.

On Christmas Eve 2020 in Borno and Adamawa states, Nigeria, at least 24 people were killed, over 20 abducted, a church burned and a pastor kidnapped by Islamist militants during two attacks. The armed militants, thought to belong to Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), an offshoot of Boko Haram, first raided the predominantly Christian village of Pemi, near Chibok in Borno State, killing eleven people and setting fire to buildings.

The jihadists went on to abduct at least 20 Christians and singled out five to be lined up and shot in a second attack near Garkida, Adamawa State. In an online video released by the terrorists showing the killings, a voice said, “Celebrate your Christmas with the present of the heads of these Christians.”



The nine victims of an attack by Fulani militants on Hura village, Plateau State, Nigeria, which included two young children and a pregnant woman, were buried in two graves

Terror across the Sahel

The Sahel region of Africa – the area around the south of the Sahara desert – has also experienced a dramatic increase in Islamic terrorist activity. Among the areas most badly affected is the tri-border area between **Mali**, **Niger** and **Burkina Faso**. All three countries suffer from the activity of Islamist groups linked to either Al-Qaeda or Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh), most notably Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

A senior Christian leader in Mali reported in April 2021 that more than 50 Malian Christians – men, women and children – had been shot, beheaded or burned to death by Islamists. In the ethnically Dogon areas of central Mali around 95% of church buildings have been destroyed. In May 2020 heavily armed jihadists on motorcycles killed 27 people in three attacks on mainly Christian Dogon villages. In central Mali seven Christians were abducted by Islamists between November 2020 and 2021. They reported being forced to speak in Arabic and recite Islamic prayers in an effort by their captors to force them to deny Christ.

Niger has experienced attacks not only from ISGS but also from Boko Haram. In May 2021 a church in Tillabéri was vandalised during an attack by what one



The aftermath of the Easter 2019 bombing in Sri Lanka. This was one of three churches which were attacked, along with three other venues where Christians would gather

eyewitness described as “a horde of terrorists who came on motorcycles”. The terrorists left five dead and two seriously injured.

In Burkina Faso the rise of extremist Islam has caused devastation, destroyed agriculture and displaced more than one million people. This, together with recurring drought and famine and the Covid pandemic that began in 2020, plunged the already poor landlocked country into a humanitarian crisis. In June 2021 four Christians were killed in a savage attack which left as many as 160 dead overall. In May 2021 terrorists struck a baptism ceremony in northern Burkina Faso, killing 15.

Africa the “centre of gravity” for IS terrorism

According to a Global Terrorism Index report published in November 2020, the “centre of gravity” for IS activity has moved from the Middle East to Africa, leading to a “surge in terrorism in many countries in the region”.

Christians in the Christian-majority **Central African Republic (CAR)** continue to be vulnerable to violence from Islamist armed groups such as the Séléka, despite a ceasefire agreement between the government and several rival rebel groups signed in 2017. Christians also face regular threats of violence and kidnapping from militant Muslim Fulani herdsmen; the Fulani also pose a threat to Christians in Nigeria.

In June 2021 Islamists from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) bombed a church in Beni, **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**, during a Sunday service injuring two women. Earlier that month a church minister was among at least 55 people killed in an ADF attack on IDP camps. In April Christian leaders in DRC warned of ADF’s strategy to “kidnap and force victims to join the Islamic faith”.

Islamists terrorise Christians in the Middle East and around the world

In the Middle East IS and other Islamists have been responsible for terrorising Christians and radicalising local Muslim communities, most notably in **Iraq** and **Syria**. Terrorist attacks by IS and linked groups also remain a threat to Christians in **Libya**. In 2019, Islamist militants attacked the Qasr bin Ghashir detention centre and opened fire on Christian refugees gathered for prayer, killing two and injuring up to 20.

Terrorists based in Libya have also launched attacks on Christians in neighbouring **Egypt**. Al-Qaeda and IS-linked Mohammad Mohammad al-Sayyid, the suspected mastermind of the bombing of several Egyptian churches, was captured by the Libyan army in April 2020. Amongst other atrocities, he is believed to have been responsible for the notorious 2017 twin suicide bombings of churches in the northern city of Tanta and Alexandria carried out by IS on Palm Sunday that claimed 46 lives.

Recent years have seen sporadic violent extremist attacks on Christians in **Ethiopia**. In June 2020 hundreds of Christians of many ethnicities were brutally slaughtered by members of Qeerroo (meaning “bachelors”), a male youth movement of the Oromo ethnic group. Terrorists have also launched attacks in **Kenya, Somalia**, and northern **Mozambique**, the latter now known as “the land of fear” after as many as 831 Islamist attacks since 2017 which have killed at least 2,658 and displaced around 750,000.

The IS-linked militant group, Abu Sayyaf, had been active for decades in the south of the **Philippines**, where Islam predominates in an archipelago that is otherwise more than 80% Christian.

Islamist attacks also occur in **Indonesia**, home to

the world's largest Muslim population. While hostility from the Muslim community varies greatly in intensity across the country, in recent years there has been a rise in hardline Islamic ideology. Nineteen people were injured when two suicide bombers blew themselves up outside a church in Makassar, on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, on Sunday 28 March 2021 during a Palm Sunday service. The two bombers, a married couple, who arrived at a side entrance of the church on a motorcycle, had been prevented from entering by a security guard.

On Easter Sunday 2019, Islamists attacked three churches along with other Christian targets in **Sri Lanka**, killing 267 and injuring at least 500.

4. NATURAL DISASTERS

Natural disasters are not themselves an example of persecution, but they add greatly to the problems of our suffering family already living with daily discrimination and harassment or the risk of violence. Christians, already at the margins of society, are often among the most acutely affected by natural disasters of all kinds. The current pandemic, earthquakes, hurricanes, droughts, floods, plagues of locusts – all have taken a terrible toll on minorities who are weak, powerless, and desperately poor due to discrimination which restricts their access to jobs and education. Sometimes they are specifically discriminated against when aid and relief are distributed.

Christians in Madagascar struck by famine

In the far south of **Madagascar** an elderly Christian, “Catherine”, wondered why her younger relatives had stopped appearing for their regular monthly visits. Catherine decided to investigate, making the 75km from her remote village by ox-cart to the even remoter village where her relatives lived. She found that the whole family – parents and three children – had died of starvation, just a few days before she arrived.



Starving Christians in Madagascar. People have been eating mud or ashes to try to fill their stomachs

Southern Madagascar had not had a rainy season for the last two years when famine took hold in December 2020. The rains finally came in early 2021, but an infestation of fall armyworms – a kind of caterpillar – destroyed the maize crop. At the time of writing, people were dying every day.

Locust plagues ravage East Africa and Pakistan

At the end of January 2021 locusts invaded northern **Kenya** again. Arriving at harvest time, insects devoured field crops, vegetables, cattle fodder and grazing land in the affected parts of the country. This blow followed the 2020 plague of locusts, which was the worst seen in East Africa for many decades.

Thousands of Christian farming families faced food insecurity and famine in 2020 after millions of locusts caused catastrophic loss to spring crops in Sindh Province, one of the poorest rural regions of **Pakistan** in November 2019. On a scale almost unheard of in Pakistan, an immense swarm of the insects ravaged around 30,000 acres of land destroying both cash and subsistence crops.

The four types of pressures discussed above also interact with each other and overlap in complex ways to create four further types of pressure on Christians. An example of this is **Chad**, where multiple natural disasters – floods in one region along with droughts in others, as well as Covid-19 and five other deadly diseases – combined with terrorist violence from Boko Haram and growing hostility from the Muslim community to create a perfect storm of pressure and hardship for Christians who were already marginalised and poor.

The situation in Chad is replicated in many other contexts where Christians today are overwhelmed by a whole spectrum of difficulties and challenges.

5. GOVERNMENT SANCTIONS

Often on top of war and conflict comes the added pressure of international government sanctions limiting trade or other restrictions. Usually it is the poorest and most vulnerable, often Christian and other minorities, in such war-torn countries who will suffer most.

Sanctions imposed by governments can worsen the circumstances of Christians struggling under oppressive regimes or caught up in regional conflicts. Sanctions can result in severe deprivation for ordinary people at levels similar to natural disasters. At the time of writing the US government has placed sanctions on **Iran** that prevent humanitarian aid reaching this desperately afflicted country, including the Christian minority.

In war-ravaged **Syria** it is estimated that at least eleven million people, about 60% of the population, are in need of humanitarian aid. US sanctions (known as the Caesar Act) have been criticised for causing further decline and harming those already in desperate need, including Christians.



Islamists desecrated many church buildings and other Christian sites, such as this one in northern Iraq. Islamist violence and the wider regional conflict has forced many Iraqi Christians to abandon their historic homeland.

6. SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Community pressure can mean that Christians are excluded from aid distribution after a natural disaster. Sometimes life-saving humanitarian aid is offered to Christians only on condition that they convert to the majority religion.

This type of social exclusion is rarely, if ever, due to a government decision, but is usually the decision of a local person at the end of the aid distribution chain – who is actually handing out the food. He or she may decide to omit a Christian village or to reject someone waiting in line who has a Christian name. Examples of this form of exclusion have occurred in **India** during the second wave of Covid-19, and to Christians among the Muslim-majority Rohingya having fled from Myanmar to **Bangladesh**.

7. DISPLACEMENT

Anti-Christian violence and regional conflict, especially when combined, create huge numbers of displaced Christians, as survivors flee to safer areas, leaving behind their homes, jobs, fields or other livelihoods, which are often burnt or destroyed by terrorists anyway. Some displaced Christians cross borders into other countries and become refugees. Many Christians have uprooted themselves and fled several times.

In **Myanmar** a displaced Karen Christian schoolteacher, “John” (aged 42), explained that because military violence in Karen State has raged on for at

least seven decades neither he, his parents nor his grandparents have experienced peace in their lifetimes. “Everything is very uncertain, it’s very hard for me and the other teachers to plan lessons for our students. We also need to stay alert and think of the safety of our students,” said John.

Similar problems affect Christians in many parts of the world. In **Iraq**, the ethnic cleansing and conquest of Mosul and the Plains of Nineveh (the historic centre of Iraqi Christianity) by IS militants who occupied the region from 2014 to 2017 caused huge numbers of Christians to flee to Iraqi Kurdistan.

8. WAR AND CONFLICT

Government policies, international conflicts, and terrorist violence can often interact, creating situations in which Christian minorities may endure even greater pressures. Government attempts to tackle terrorist violence can also lead to internal conflict, leaving Christians caught in the middle or even as the target of terrorist retribution.

In the **DRC** a surge of anti-Christian violence came in the troubled north-east after the Congolese army launched a large-scale offensive against the Islamist militants in October 2019. Every time the government forces mount an operation against the Islamist group ADF, which has inflicted immense suffering on the predominantly Christian communities, civilians (Christians) are attacked by the ADF afterwards as retribution. A similar situation occurred in **Kenya**, where Al-Shabaab militants launched reprisals against Christians after the Kenyan government sought to tackle Al-Shabaab activity in Somalia.

This is our God

Isaiah 40:1-11

TRADITIONAL IRISH

(CARRIGDONN / MOUNTAINS OF MOURNE)

Arranged by NOEL FROST

Words by CAROLINE KERSLAKE

Take com-fort! Your years of hard ser-vice are spent." The mes-sage through an-gels and

pro-phets was sent. But who is the One who is set-ting us free? Our

Sav-iour, De-liv-e-rer, Hope who is He? O this is our God. He's the An-cient of

Days, the One whom the hea-ven-ly se-ra-phim praise. And high on His throne this great

King is our Friend whose love and whose faith-ful-ness ne-ver will end. end.

Verse 2

We humans are fickle and feeble and frail.
 We bend in the wind and our promises fail.
 Our love is as fragile as petals that fall.
 But One who is coming will rescue us all.
 O this is our God, who is faithful and true.
 Whatever He promises, that He will do.
 His Word stands for ever, and we can depend
 On our God, for His faithfulness never will end.

Verse 3

O who is this Shepherd, so gentle and kind?
 How happy the sheep are who follow behind,
 For this is a Shepherd who knows each by name
 And tenderly cares for the sick and the lame.
 O this is our God, with the lambs in His arms,
 Close to His heart and secure from all harm.
 For ever He'll cherish them, love and defend.
 The Good Shepherd's faithfulness never will end.

Sermon Outline

God's faithfulness in times of suffering – Isaiah 40:1-11

This sermon outline can be used at a Suffering Church service or meeting. It can be read out as it stands (you may want to omit the Bible references in brackets). You could add some illustrations of your own or take some from the information on pages 10-18. You might also find helpful material in the small group Bible study on page 22 or the eight-day Devotional Booklet. Alternatively, the outline can be used as a framework for your own ideas and applications. A PowerPoint to accompany the sermon can be downloaded from barnabasfund.org/scaaw

Introduction

The land is desolate and laid waste, Jerusalem and the temple destroyed. The people of God are in exile in Babylon, afflicted and oppressed.

This is the situation addressed by Isaiah's prophecy, which gives a message of hope and consolation for a crisis

that was still many years in the future when he brought this message from God. What was in the future for Isaiah is in the past for us, but the deep riches of these words, with their many layers of meaning, are given to us in Scripture for our hope and consolation too.

1. The angelic message of comfort and forgiveness (v.1-2)

The scene at the beginning of chapter 40 is set in heaven, in the court of the King of kings, who is speaking to His angelic messengers, sending them out with a message of comfort, deliverance, hope and love to His beleaguered people.

We live not only in a physical world but also in a spiritual world. It is in heaven that decisions are made about what happens on earth. Nothing is left to "chance" and God's purposes will ultimately be fulfilled. Our lives are not at the mercy of haphazard random events, for God is in control.

In verse 1 of our passage, God is instructing His angels¹ to bring a message of comfort to His people. In verse 2, God tells His angels to pass on the message tenderly. It is the Hebrew word for wooing and literally means speaking "to the heart".

The message is for people who are suffering, people who have endured a period of "hard service". The Hebrew word is *saba*, which describes a time of discipline, hardship and pain – but of limited duration. The message the angels bring is that the *saba* has reached its end. From our perspective, on the other side of the cross, we can hear the message as a promise that the time of striving legalistically for an unbroken relationship with God

has come to an end, because Christ has died to take away our sins.

But for the first hearers of Isaiah, the *saba* was their exile in Babylon, a punishment for their sinfulness. Now they are forgiven. "Her sin has been paid for" (v.2 NIV) is translated in some Bible versions as "her iniquity is pardoned". This is not the pardon available to us because of the atonement of the Lord Jesus. It is impossible for us to atone for our sins, let alone doubly atone for them; only our Redeemer can do that. But God in His graciousness speaks to His people as if they had somehow earned what in reality He is giving as a free and undeserved gift. This forgiveness and restoration is the core of the message of comfort.

Genesis chapter 3 tells us that Adam and Eve's sinful rebellion against God was what brought pain and suffering into the world. Not all suffering is a *direct* result of sin. Many suffer, whether it be cancer, Covid or cyclones, simply because of the natural order of things in our fallen world. But at the beginning of Isaiah 40, the sufferings of the people of God were directly due to their rebellion against Him, displayed in their corruption and idolatry.

Sin is serious. It is rebellion. It is grievous in the eyes of the Lord.

2. Preparing for the coming deliverance (v.3-5)

With the message of comfort and forgiveness comes a message of hope. Something marvellous is about to happen: the LORD will lead His people out of Babylon and back to their own land. A fitting highway must be prepared and all obstacles removed, just as was done in the ancient Middle East before a conquering monarch.

This was also a prophecy about John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ (Matthew 3:3). John's method of preparing a straight, level, smooth road was to call the nation to ready themselves spiritually, for their God was about to come and redeem them.

The desert or wilderness is a place of suffering, where the Divine may seem absent. Yet Moses encountered the LORD in the burning bush at "the far side of the wilderness"

(Exodus 3:1-2). Elijah, exhausted and afraid, went into the wilderness and prayed to die, but there the LORD sent an angel to bring him food that gave supernatural strength (1 Kings 19:3-8). The wilderness was the scene for Jesus' temptations, after which angels came and cared for Him.

So the desert is a place where God is encountered. It is a place of purification and therefore of hope. When God delivered His people from Egypt and led them in the desert, they were sorely tried and their sinfulness was exposed. But from this experience came a renewed people, faithful to their God.

We should never be afraid of a wilderness experience. It is a *saba* to be embraced. For there the disciplining hand of God works in our lives.

And what is the purpose? Verse 5 tells us it is to reveal the glory of the LORD, to display His mighty work as a covenant-keeping God who delivers His people from bondage and brings them back to their own land. This would demonstrate Yahweh's faithfulness and redound to His glory and praise.

The glory of the LORD is His goodness, as shown in His mercy and compassion. The coming of the

Messiah would show the glory of the LORD to an even greater degree.

God's glory is also described as dazzling radiance. Ezekiel, for example, wrote of glowing metal, fire, brilliant light and rainbows as he struggled to describe what he called "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (Ezekiel 1:26-28).

3. Confidence in the unchanging Word of God (v.6-8)

Humankind is as frail and short-lived as grass (v.6-7). The feebleness of humankind makes it all the more wonderful that the Word became flesh in the incarnation (John 1:14).

But if humans are like grass, what do the flowers represent? Many Bible translations say our "glory" or "beauty". But these words are way off the mark. The word in Hebrew is *hesed*, meaning a steadfast and unswerving love like that shown by our covenant-keeping God. Our own *hesed*, however, is as fragile as a wildflower. Our faithfulness cannot be relied on, our loyalty wavers, we break our promises, our kindness is sporadic.

Human technology may fool us into thinking that we are strong, powerful and eternal, until we realise that a tiny microbe can destroy our world. Then we grasp

that humankind is fundamentally weak and vulnerable. But this need not trouble us, for our God truly is strong, powerful and eternal. And He is faithful. Unlike our frail *hesed*, His *hesed* is completely dependable.

The steadfast love (*hesed*) of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23 NRSV)

We can trust confidently in His unfailing Word, which stands for ever (v.8). Because of God's faithfulness, His promise of deliverance to His people in Babylon was dependable and so is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:25).

4. Enfolded in the eternal arms of God (v.9-11)

There are several interpretations of verse 9, all of them uplifting. According to one interpretation, good news is being proclaimed *by* Jerusalem (also called Zion) to the other cities of Judah. In another interpretation the good news is proclaimed *to* Jerusalem. Either way the desolate, long-forsaken cities are told that happier times are about to return as Yahweh is coming back, bringing the exiles with Him.

The phrase "do not be afraid" often announces the appearance of God, as here in verse 9. At the birth of Jesus, the angels used the same words to Mary and to the shepherds (Luke 1:30; 2:10). They appear often in Isaiah.

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come..." (Isaiah 35:3-4)

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

A third interpretation says that the LORD's messenger must bring the good news to His people, who are addressed as Zion and Jerusalem, the good news that "Here is your God!" (v.9)

Then we read two descriptions of that God, showing His power and His gentleness. "His arm rules for Him" (v.10) means that Yahweh has no need of any outside help to accomplish His purposes, whether it is rescuing the exiles in Babylon or defeating Satan at the cross.

But we also read that He is like a shepherd, strong to protect the flock but sensitive to their needs, carrying the lambs in His arms. The strong arms of deliverance are also the gentle arms that bear up the youngest and weakest. They are the everlasting arms of our eternal God (Deuteronomy 33:27). They are the arms of Jesus.

For a Christian cannot read of the LORD who tends His flock like a shepherd without thinking of the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:14-16; 27-28). Here, indeed, is our God!

Let us conclude by looking at what is perhaps the most astonishing, thrilling and humbling part of the whole passage.

See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. (Isaiah 40:10)

Verse 10 tells us that the Sovereign LORD is going to be rewarded for the years of misery that He endured while His wayward people rebelled and suffered their punishment. To see His people's joy as they return to their land will be His reward.

Dare we also say that He missed them while they had wandered away from Him? Like Rachel weeping for her children, He wept for us (Jeremiah 31:15-20). Like the father of the prodigal son, in the parable Jesus told, He considers our returning home a cause for tremendous celebration (Luke 15:11-24).

This is how much our faithful God loves us. Let this thought comfort us whatever suffering we may be enduring. And let us resolve to bring Him joy and glory by walking closely with our Shepherd.

¹ Some interpretations see this as an instruction to prophets or other human leaders.

Bible Study

This study follows the same Bible passage as the Sermon Outline (pages 20-21). It can be used before or after hearing the sermon. If it is used without the sermon, it may be useful for the group leader to read through the sermon outline beforehand. You may also like to read the SCAAW 2021 eight-day Devotional Booklet, which is enclosed with this magazine and can be downloaded from barnabasfund.org/scaaw or ordered from your nearest Barnabas Fund office (details inside front cover). The section headed "Digging Deeper" is for those who would like to explore the theme in more depth.



READ ISAIAH 40:1-11

The angelic message of comfort and forgiveness (v.1-2)

1. In this passage, we are reminded that God is in full, sovereign control over all that takes place with nothing left to "chance". How should we respond to that truth? Do we find this a comfort when we or others undergo times of *saba*, "hard service" (v.2, which describes a time of discipline, hardship and pain – but of limited duration)?
2. How is sin related to suffering? Is suffering always the direct consequence of sin? Or is suffering simply the consequence of living in a fallen world? If suffering is not necessarily related to sin, do you find that thought comforting, depressing or frustrating? Share with the group your initial response and notice whether your view changes with discussion.
3. Have you experienced a time of *saba*? Have you ever been delivered after a long period of suffering? How did it feel?
4. How do you think the first hearers felt about their sin being doubly atoned for?

Preparing for the coming deliverance (v.3-5)

5. What is the significance of "the way of the LORD" being made through the wilderness, for the Israelite exiles and for the suffering Church today? Why is the wilderness so significant?
6. Why is it necessary to prepare the way for the LORD? How can we do this in our own lives?
7. What is God's purpose in leading His people through the wilderness? How can we align ourselves with this purpose when we find ourselves in a wilderness?

8. How did Jesus respond to His desert experience (Matthew 4)? Can we respond in a similar way? God assures us that "every valley will be raised up, every mountain and hill will be made low" (v.4). How does that apply in our lives?

Confidence in the unchanging Word of God (v.6-8)

9. Why is the *hesed* (steadfast love or faithfulness) of human beings likened to a wildflower? How does this compare with God's *hesed*?
10. How can we be more dependable and demonstrate *hesed*?
11. What does it mean that the word of the LORD endures forever? Does it make any difference to our lives?

Enfolded in the eternal arms of God (v.9-11)

12. What is the good news proclaimed to (or by) Jerusalem in v.9? What does this good news mean for the suffering Church today?
13. Why does Isaiah keep exhorting us not to fear (7:4, 8:12, 35:4, 41:13-14, 43:1, 5, 44:2, 8, 54:4, 14)? Have you ever experienced a godly fear (Isaiah 8:13, 11:2)?
14. How should we understand the declaration in v.10 that the LORD "rules with a mighty arm"? Several translations refer to "His arm ruling for Him" where "arm" refers to strength. What does this tell us about how we should think and feel about the enemies of the Church?
15. Is it right to expect a reward from God (Hebrews 11:6)? Or do we not deserve anything? What is the "reward" which belongs to God (v.10)? What does this tell us about the nature of God and how He relates to His people? How do we reconcile seeking a reward and recognising our own unworthiness?



Digging deeper

16. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem" (v.2). What insight do we get from this passage or from Jesus' life of the passionate love we should have for our cities, towns and villages?
17. *Hesed* is translated in various ways, as glory, beauty, loveliness, faithfulness, constancy, goodness, loyalty and kindness and in the Amplified Bible as "all that makes it attractive (its charm, its loveliness)". Where in Scripture do you find *hesed* being most powerfully demonstrated? Is there a connection between faithfulness, beauty and glory?
18. What does it mean for Jerusalem to receive "double for all her sins"? Reflect on the references to paying double for crimes (Exodus 22:4, 7, 9, Jeremiah 16:18, Revelation 18:6 in reference to Babylon). Consider Elijah's request for a "double portion of your Spirit" (2 Kings 2:9) and God's desire to bless (Isaiah 61:7). What do we learn of God's justice and bountiful generosity?
19. What does it mean to have the glory of the LORD revealed? How is the appearance of God's glory described elsewhere in Scripture? (Exodus 16:10, 24:16-17, 1 Kings 8:11, Psalm 72:19, Isaiah 60:19, Ezekiel 1:28, Luke 9:32, John 1:14, Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 3:18).
20. God is here described as a shepherd (v.11), putting us in mind of the Lord Jesus Christ. What does this tell us about the relationship between God as revealed in the Old Testament and Christ in the New Testament?

Activities for children and young people



God is faithful in times of suffering (Isaiah 40:1-11)

It has been a hard year for many of us. Perhaps you have suffered this year through disruption to your education, not being able to meet up with friends, illness, or even losing loved ones. Around the world children and young people have suffered much, especially Christians in lands where they face persecution. On top of being often hungry, thirsty and sick, they are persecuted just for being Christians. Isaiah, speaking as God’s mouthpiece, knew we all need comfort in hard times (v.2). But there are great promises that can help us pray for and support young people. God is in control and will eventually sort things out and no mountain is too high for Him (v.4). His word lasts forever and can be a source of comfort in troubled times (v. 8). And He always carries them close to His heart as a good shepherd (v.11).



Raise awareness through social media... and food.gives

Sharing our Facebook page with your family and friends on social media is a brilliant way to help suffering Christians. And ask them to do the same. Our Facebook page is www.facebook.com/BarnabasFund. On Facebook, you will find the SCAAW post pinned to the top of our page. Please like our page and share the SCAAW post with your friends and family – ask them to do the same.

This year, a great practical step you can take is to be involved with food.gives. See page 8. You, your family or youth group can make a huge difference in sending food to poor Christians in different parts of the world.



Prayer challenge – what happened next?

Many young people in the Bible stood up for God’s truth when the going got rough and saw Him rule “with a mighty arm” (v.10) but also with gentleness (v.11). Read on from the verses in brackets below to see how God used these four young people. Then turn your thoughts into prayer: ask Him how you can respond in situations you face today and in helping the suffering Church worldwide.

Gideon felt powerless when faced with brutal invaders but... (Judges 6:12)

Ruth lost her husband when very young but ... (Ruth 1:16)

David was despised as the youngest and weakest but... (1 Samuel 17:26)

Esther faced death in confronting a cruel king but... (Esther 4:12)

You can use the *Barnabas Prayer Diary* – enclosed in this magazine and available online www.barnabasfund.org/prayer-diary – to guide you or your youth group as you pray.



Find the country

Can you find the names of four countries below where Barnabas Fund helps Christians who are suffering? The first letter of the answer is also a letter of the country. (For example, for Country 1, the second letter is **L** from the answer to the second clue, **Love**. For Country 3, the seventh letter is **I** from the answer to the seventh clue, **Isaiah**).

1		L						
2								
3						I		
4								

What Jesus was under after Judas betrayed him.

It is even greater than faith and hope. **Love**

All people are like this, says Isaiah.

1 She is an Old Testament book and a queen.

Paul wrote a famous letter to them.

Barnabas supports Christians in this land of many islands.

They went about proclaiming the Word of God.

What some Christians suffer for their faith.

A Christian is meant to be an ... for Christ.

Pick one of two countries in Central Asia!

2 A short name of an Asian country.

He suffered for his faith. The very first martyr.

The ... of Babel. Many languages spoken here.

The continent where the church started.

A very mountainous country next to India.

He led God’s people out of Egypt.

A number: ... faith, ... Lord, ... baptism.

Either of two prophets at the end of the Old Testament!

The world’s first Christian nation.

3 She was the mother of Jesus.

He was nicknamed “son of encouragement”.

Speaking through **Isaiah** God said, “Comfort my people.”

Birds sent to feed God’s people in Exodus.

An ... church has to meet in secret.

He had to face 450 prophets of Baal.

He built a very big boat.

God is a God of ..., not confusion.

The last book of the Bible.

Paul wrote to him a couple of times.

4 God carries his lambs close to his ...

May Your ... come, Your will be done.

A very short book of the Old Testament.

The ... shall live by faith.

A country in east Africa. Choose one of two!

He survived the furnace. Either name will do!

Getting Involved

WITH SUFFERING CHURCH ACTION AND AWARENESS WEEK



Pray for your suffering brothers and sisters

There are many ways to show your love for persecuted Christians around the world during Suffering Church Action and Awareness Week by supporting them in prayer. You may like to commit to praying regularly for a project (some examples can be found on p6-7) or countries where our brothers and sisters endure harassment and persecution. Please pray about the 8 types of persecution Christians suffer (explained on p10-18). Or you could use

our 8-day Devotional Booklet to inspire your daily prayers. Perhaps your prayer or church home group could organise a special daily prayer event using these 8 themes. Our new prayer for SCAAW 2021 is featured on this page and also on the enclosed SCAAW bookmark. Keep the bookmark close at hand to inspire you in prayer at all times of the day. Every *Barnabas Aid* magazine includes a *Prayer Diary* to inform and inspire your prayers each day.



Order your SCAAW resources

See p9 for a complete list of resources that you can request from us free of charge.

Raise awareness at Sunday services or group meetings

Dedicate a special service on 31 October or 7 November (or another Sunday that suits your church calendar) to stand with our persecuted brothers and sisters and praise the everlasting faithfulness of our mighty Lord. When you are planning your themed Sunday service or other group meeting, you may find the following resources useful: Sermon Outline (p20) with a PowerPoint presentation available to download from our website, Bible Study (p22), Hard Pressed on Every Side, overview of 8 main pressures facing Christians (p10-18), new hymn on the theme of God's faithfulness (from Isaiah 40:1-11), entitled *This is our God*, (p19) and a recording of *This is our God*, with words and images, available from our website, other suggested hymns and songs (this page), our special SCAAW prayer (this page) and, for children, our puzzle and a prayer challenge (p23).

Make sure everyone goes home with something to remind them of their persecuted brothers and sisters. So order plenty of copies of our new prayer bookmark or the 8-day Devotional Booklet or more copies of this magazine to distribute to the congregation. All are available free of charge in whatever quantities you need.

We have an A4 poster (p25) and an A3 poster (available from your local Barnabas office and to download from our website) for you to advertise your event.



Suggested hymns and songs for your SCAAW church service

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Thomas Chisholm
Common Praise 453

Faithful One, so unchanging

Brian Doerksen
Complete Mission Praise 825

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Isaac Watts
Ancient and Modern 746

We See the Lord

Anonymous
Complete Mission Praise 736

The Lord's My Shepherd

Francis Rous
Complete Mission Praise 660

Faithful God, faithful God

Chris Bowater
Complete Mission Praise 824



Show your love in a practical way with a gift

Consider asking your church leadership about taking a collection for suffering Christians at your SCAAW church service or meeting. If you would like to give to a particular project, perhaps you could donate dry food or money to our new food.gives initiative (p8), or choose one of the projects featured on p6-7.

Alternatively, you could give to our General Fund and we will use your gift wherever the need is greatest. Donations to the General Fund enable us to react quickly to emergency situations, and meet needs that are too sensitive to publicise.

We have Gift Aid envelopes and cardboard money boxes available – please order in whatever quantities you need.

Our supporters frequently amaze us by the imaginative ways they find to raise money (p27). Could you organise a fundraising event for SCAAW? Perhaps you could hold a coffee morning or cake sale at your church, organise a car wash or coordinate a sponsored event such as a walk or cycle ride.

A Prayer for the Suffering Church

God our rock,

Be with us in this time of trouble.
Be with our brothers and sisters
Who are marginalised and despised.

God our comforter,

Be with us in this time of trial.
Be with our brothers and sisters
Who endure violence and injustice.

God our protector,

Be with us in this time of evil.
Be with our brothers and sisters
Who are persecuted for Christ.

God our healer,

Be with us in this time of sickness.
Be with our brothers and sisters
Who live with suffering and death.

God our hope,

Be with us all and restore us again
That we may sing Your praises
In the house of the Lord.

In the Name of Christ,

Amen



God's faithfulness

in times of suffering

What we're doing for Suffering Church Action and Awareness Week

What



When

Where



barnabasfund.org/scaaw



Suffering Church Action
and Awareness Week


barnabasfund
hope and aid for the persecuted church

What did your gifts achieve?

In the last year* your giving funded



Education of 13,900 children supported in 137 schools/institutes in 8 countries



Regular feeding programmes assisted 29,000 individuals in 8 countries



19,000 individuals helped with small business livelihood projects in 8 countries



Theological and other leadership training: 9,700 individuals trained in 26 countries



Supported more than 495,000 disaster victims in 40 countries



9 medical projects to help at least 13,000 individuals in 6 countries



900 converts helped in 6 countries



36,000 individuals assisted in 13 countries



59 full-time Christian workers (5 pastors and 54 evangelists) helped in 8 countries



Over 31,000 items, including 3,000 New Testaments and 28,000 Christian books, in 12 countries

*May 2020 to April 2021

Nigeria campaign update: Commonwealth meeting postponed

The 2021 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, at which we hoped Commonwealth leaders would discuss the plight of persecuted Nigerian Christians, has once again been postponed. At the time of writing the meeting, which had been due to take place in Rwanda in late June, has not yet been rescheduled.

We are very grateful to the 6,537 of you who signed our petition asking heads of government, including UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, to raise the persecution of our Nigerian brothers and sisters as a matter of concern.

Please continue to pray that when the meeting does take place Commonwealth leaders will take decisive action against the increasing violence directed towards the Nigerian Church.

Armenian Genocide campaign update: Petition to be delivered

Our petition calling upon governments to officially recognise as genocide the mass murder of Armenian, Assyrian, Syriac and Greek Christians in the Ottoman Empire before, during and after the First World War was signed by 14,572 of you around the world, of whom 9,082 were in the UK. Between 1893 and 1923 some 3.75 million Armenian, Assyrian, Greek and Syriac Christians were killed.

By the time you read this we hope that the petition will have been delivered. Please pray that the UK government and other governments will recognise the genocide, and that this will help to avert a second genocide of Armenian Christians.

Church youth group stops wasting time and beats fundraising target

Members of a church youth group in Hampshire, UK, surpassed expectations when they set out to raise funds for Barnabas projects by being sponsored to stop wasting time.

Their aim was to buy a goat, or perhaps two goats, to help an impoverished and marginalised Pakistani Christian farmer to become self-sufficient. However, they went on to raise an amazing £2,224, enough to buy ten goats, ten chickens, ten piglets, ten frying pans and a tube well to help Christians in Pakistan, Bangladesh and south-east Asia. The money also helped fund the education of 69 Pakistani Christian children and set free from bonded labour two Pakistani Christian brick-kiln families by paying off their debts to the brick-kiln owner.

The challenge set to young people at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Crookhorn was to do something useful instead of wasting time. For example, watching YouTube was replaced with dog walking, social media with book reading, and television with learning French.

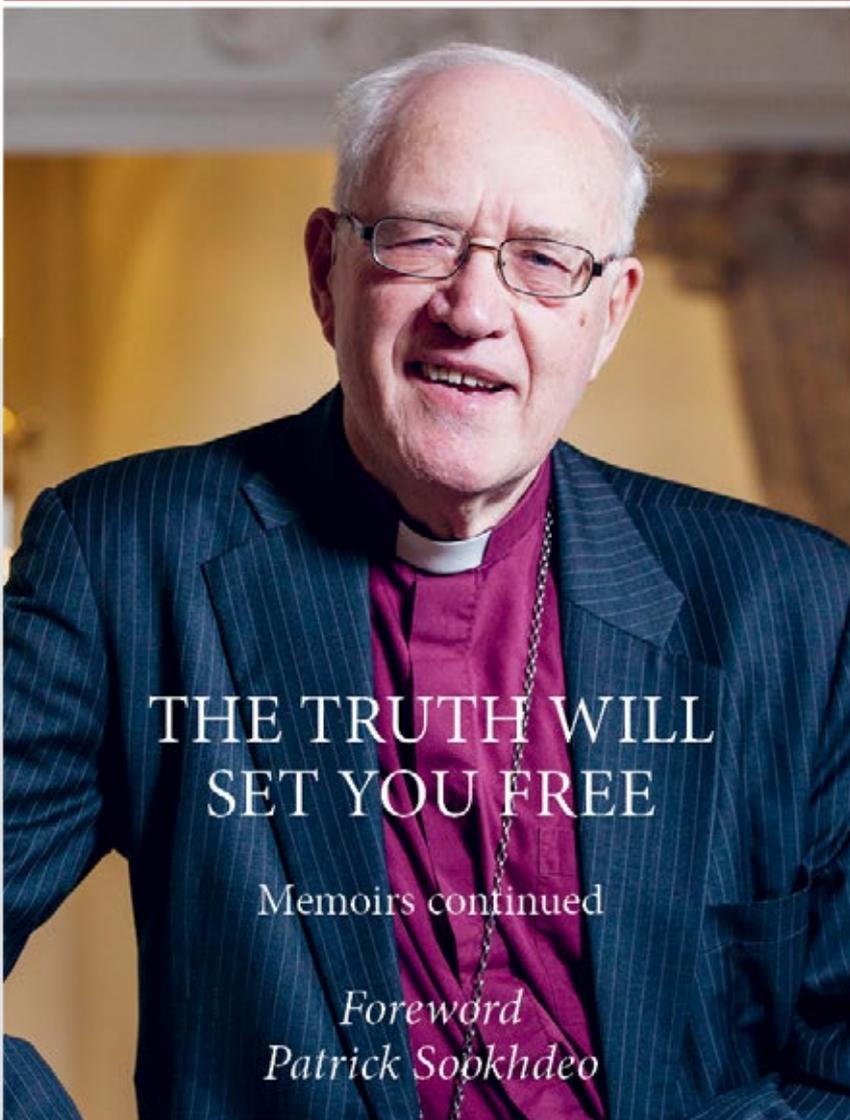
"Everyone either fulfilled their pledges or went beyond them," said a church spokesperson. "We even had a little sister join in because she wanted to give up her 'devices' too."



Well done to fundraisers (back row) Ruby, Matthew, Aki, Jeremy, Leah, Alicia, Josh; (front row) Sharn, Hannah, Jess and Emi (standing)

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