



Praying for the Suffering Church



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bringing hope to suffering Christians

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Front cover: A Pakistani Christian gives thanks for Barnabas-funded aid

Praying for the Suffering Church

2023-2024

"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." (Ephesians 6:18)

The Apostle Paul instructs the Ephesian believers – and in turn, Christian believers in all times and places – to “always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people”. This instruction is set in the context of suffering and spiritual opposition – “the devil’s schemes”, “the powers of this dark world, “the day of evil” (Ephesians 6:11-13).

Just as the instruction to pray continually is for all believers throughout history, so the experience of suffering is common to the Lord’s people wherever and whenever they find themselves. Certainly the suffering of some is far more acute than that of others, but none are fully free from the troubles and tribulations of this fallen world.

The global Church suffers in several ways: war, disaster, famine, disease and

persecution. These sources of trial were prophesied by the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 21:9-11) and in the Revelation given to the Apostle John (Revelation 6:1-11). In the face of this suffering it becomes clear that prayer is an urgent duty, as well as a God-given privilege.

Paul also instructs us to “be alert” as we keep on praying. The intention of this booklet is to keep us alert to the needs of our Christian family around the world, thereby guiding us in our prayers. Most pages are dedicated to a particular country, others 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.

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, 22 February, to Easter Day, 9 April. A reading plan for this period can be found on the inside back cover.



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Afghanistan

Afghanistan's ancient Christian community was finally driven out by Islamist conquest in the fourteenth century. The return to power of the Taliban in September 2021 threatens to do the same to a new generation of Christian converts. The Taliban gave Christians three choices: leave, reconvert to Islam, or face death.

Afghanistan's Christians are first-generation converts from Islam and their children, and according to sharia (Islamic law) apostates who should be executed. According to the Hanafi school of Islam, which historically dominates in Afghanistan, this applies only to sane adult males – but there is no doubt that in the Taliban's strict interpretation all apostates would face death.

Many Christians chose to flee. Barnabas is working tirelessly to assist Christians to find safe refuge. At the time of writing, 54 believers have been able to settle in Brazil.

There were an estimated 5,000 to 8,000 believers in Afghanistan. Only the Lord knows the exact figure, but it is certainly far fewer now. Those who remain must keep their faith secret. As well as the fear of being discovered by Taliban fighters, who have gone door to door searching for Christians and confiscated mobile phones to search for Christian content, converts also face death at the hands of family and former friends.

Christians also share in the general hunger and destitution of Afghanistan,

which suffers from Taliban misgovernment as well as Western-imposed sanctions and confiscation of assets. There are reports of people selling organs or even their children just to survive. For Christians in hiding it is impossible to earn an income.

Working in much secrecy and danger, our partners in the country have used your donations to provide for their basic needs.



Samim was among the first group of Afghan refugees resettled by Barnabas Aid in Brazil

Intercede for Christians who remain in Afghanistan, that the Lord will protect them from harm and continue to provide for their needs. Ask that those who have fled into neighbouring countries will be able to find a safe place to settle. Pray that those in Brazil will adjust well to their new context.

Algeria



Alongside Algeria's 98% Muslim majority live an estimated 90,000 Christians, mainly converts from Islam and their children. Many Algerian converts are Berbers, indigenous to North Africa, but an ethnic minority in this Arab-majority country. It is not illegal to convert from Islam, but anyone proselytising Muslims risks a five-year prison sentence.

Islam is the declared state religion but the constitution guarantees freedom "to exercise worship", if exercised in accordance with the law. However, other laws reduce the effectiveness of this guarantee for non-Muslims. Although, according to a 2006 ordinance, the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship can grant permits for churches, so far none have been issued, despite repeated requests by churches.

Building safety committees have inspected many church buildings since November 2017. Part of their remit is to determine which churches qualify for permits under the 2006 ordinance. More than 20 churches have been ordered to close since the beginning of 2018, but only three are known to have been granted permission to reopen.

Aouchiche church in the port city of Béjaïa was issued an administrative closure order in April 2022. It was instructed to stop worship meetings, despite the 300-strong congregation being a member of the EPA (Église Protestante d'Algérie), the officially

recognised group of Protestant churches in Algeria. In November 2021, the Algerian government summoned Pastor Salah Chalah, the president of the EPA, to court for practising non-Muslim rites without permission.

In February 2022 local officials started legal proceedings against leaders of another EPA church in Ait Atteli in the province of Tizi Ouzou, with the aim of closing the church. The provincial governor took this action against the pastor and his father, who owns the land where the church building stands. The province of Tizi Ouzou has the highest concentration of Christians in the country.



Algeria's Christians have faced the closure of 17 churches in the past five years

Cry out to the Lord that the closure of churches on spurious administrative grounds will be halted. Pray that the authorities will issue permits for church buildings and that churches ordered to close will be reopened.

Bangladesh

A poor country vulnerable to floods and cyclones, Bangladesh came into being in 1971 following a civil war that saw the country, then known as East Pakistan, secede from West Pakistan. Whilst Islam is the state religion, Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy and the constitution allows minorities to practise and share their faith.

The Christian minority of less than 1% enjoys greater freedom than in many Muslim-majority countries, but, along with the 9% Hindu population, experiences discrimination from the 90% Muslim majority.

Anti-Christian violence began to increase from 2014 onwards, especially in rural areas, although it remains at a low level. The main targets are converts from Islam and those who are active in evangelising Muslims.

Bangladesh has restrained the rise of political Islam for many years, but Islamism is growing. Jihadi movements are recruiting powerfully, as indicated by the arrest of more than 500 militants in 2022. Islamist propaganda, economic downturn and youth unemployment, and the perception of poor governance are all factors in radicalising young Muslim men. Extremist group Hefazat-e-Islam seeks to implement a manifesto that includes the death sentence for those who insult Islam, compulsory Islamic education for children, and outlawing media content deemed anti-Islamic.

Tribal Christians, such as the Santal people group, are often the victims of land-grabbing or targeted violence. Christian villagers in the Chittagong Hill Tracts near the Myanmar border have been forced to flee from violent attacks by Buddhist extremists.

A few hundred Rohingya Christians live among 900,000 Rohingya Muslims who fled genocide in Myanmar to refugee camps in Bangladesh. They are considered traitors to their community for becoming Christians and have been attacked on occasion by Rohingya Islamist extremists.



A Christian family outside their new home, one of many built by Barnabas for Santal Christians, 5,000 of whom were left homeless through an arson attack in 2016

Intercede for the small Christian community of Bangladesh, asking that they will experience God's protection and provision. Pray that, as they present a powerful testimony of God's love to the Muslim majority, forces that seek to Islamise the nation will be silenced.

Burkina Faso

Islamist terrorists have brought devastation to Burkina Faso. In late 2022 it was estimated that jihadi groups controlled at least 40% of the country. The insurgency had driven around 2 million people from their homes, creating one of the world's fastest-growing displacement catastrophes.

"We are confronted with a security and humanitarian crisis without precedent," said Captain Ibrahim Traore when he was sworn in as interim president in October 2022 following an army coup. "Burkina's existence is in danger."

The country, where around 60% of the population are Muslim, 30% Christian and 10% followers of African Traditional Religion, was once a bastion of religious tolerance, where people of different religions lived in peace together. That harmony was shattered in 2015 when Muslim extremists in neighbouring Mali and Niger began moving into northern Burkina Faso.

The terrorists carried out relentless attacks on civilians, frequently targeting Christians, church leaders and places of worship. Christians have fled the worst-affected areas, church buildings are closed or destroyed and the few remaining believers worship in secret. Even in areas relatively unscathed by the violence Christians now worship very quietly to avoid drawing attention to themselves and risking attack.

Armed groups are targeting people's livelihoods, destroying crops and looting cattle, creating widespread food

shortages as people move from rural to urban areas. At the end of 2022, more than 600,000 were facing a hunger emergency and 4.9 million were dependent on humanitarian aid. Over 6,000 schools were shut and many thousands of children were without an education. "We have never experienced before what we now experience," a Christian contact told Barnabas.



Mama Laya and her granddaughter were among 152 Christians taken to safety by Barnabas. They had stayed behind in their villages in terror "hot zones" after others had fled. They couldn't leave because family members were disabled, elderly, sick or very young. We helped evacuate them and gave them food, Bibles and medicines

Ask the Lord to bring peace to Burkina Faso. Pray for protection for Christians and ask that they stand firm in their hope of Him, knowing He is their Rock and Refuge.

Victims of Violence and Injustice



*"Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life. You stretch out
your hand against the anger of my
foes; with your right hand you save me."
(Psalm 138:7)*

Whether from authorities, hostile local communities or extremists, many Christians live under the daily threat of violence, particularly when the national identity is closely aligned with the majority religion.

Anti-Christian mob violence in Pakistan usually relates to accusations of "blasphemy". Even if acquitted by the courts, those accused must stay in hiding because of the danger of violence from zealous Muslims.

Even by conservative standards, Islamist terrorist groups Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province and others have killed more than 10,000 Christians in Nigeria since 2015 – and the true total could be higher. In Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger hundreds of Christians have been killed and thousands displaced by Islamist groups in recent years.

Terrorists linked to Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) regularly kill Christians in raids across northern Mozambique, raping women and kidnapping boys to serve as child soldiers. They plan strategically, drawing in security forces in one area to leave other areas defenceless in making about two attacks every week.

Buddhist monks sometimes lead mobs disrupting church services in Sri Lanka, alleging that churches do not have the proper permission to meet for worship. No such legal requirement for registration exists. Extremists also interrupt Sunday services, injuring worshippers and damaging church property.

North Korea's communist government's repression includes singling out Christians for more torture, sometimes leading to martyrdom, in labour camps. In Eritrea and Iran Christians often suffer police raids, arrest, detention and torture.



Pakistani Christian Patras Masih, pictured with lawyer Aneeqa Maria, was accused of "blasphemy" in 2018 before receiving bail in August 2022

Pray for protection of Christians who experience daily the threat and reality of violence and injustice because of their faith. Ask that they will know God as their refuge and strength. Especially remember those imprisoned for the Gospel, and pray that the Lord will strengthen them and their families.

Chad



The Christians of Chad are estimated at 35% of the population. Believers routinely suffer discrimination by the Muslim majority, especially in rural areas where Muslim herders try to seize land belonging to Christian communities. Christian converts from Islam are threatened to try to force them to return to Islam.

In August 2022, Muslim extremists attacked five villages in a Christian area of Leo Chiefdom. Hundreds of homes, many grain stores and five church buildings were burned down. Such attacks are sadly common.

In recent years an estimated 3,500-5,000 Islamic State West Africa Province fighters have made their base in the Lake Chad area, a region that also includes portions of Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria. In June 2022 a military coalition from those four countries said that more than 800 jihadists had been killed in anti-terrorism operations from 28 March to 4 June.

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

Chad has faced political turmoil since the death in April 2021 of President Idriss Déby while he was commanding government forces fighting against rebels. Déby had been president since 1990. He was immediately succeeded by

a Transitional Military Council headed by his son Mahamat that was scheduled to remain in power for 18 months. This period was extended by two years on 30 September 2022, just as it was about to end. Protests in May 2022 had led to the arrests of opposition leaders.

Chad also suffers from natural disasters, including floods and droughts in different parts of the country. In July and August 2022 the heaviest rains for 32 years caused unprecedented flooding, affecting an estimated 340,000 people including many Christians.



Christians in Chad endure flooding and terrorist attacks

Pray for an end to jihadi violence and government instability in Chad. Ask the Lord to strengthen His people and provide for them despite natural disasters, loss of property and damage to agriculture. Pray also for the strength, unity and witness of the Chadian Church.

China



The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is continuing to tighten regulations on all religious activity, including Christianity, alongside the CCP's emphasis on "Sinicisation" (making Chinese).

In measures effective from March 2022, conducting religious activities online now requires official authorisation. Organisations and individuals wishing to provide religious information online must apply to their local Department of Religious Affairs office. Sermons, worship services and training activities run by religious groups, religious schools, and temples and churches may be broadcast online only after obtaining a special licence. Some churches have successfully gained licences, which are valid for three years.

Content aimed at young people is also severely restricted, and no foreign organisations or individuals are allowed to operate online religious information services within China.

Regulations introduced in June 2022 by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) and the Ministry of Finance increased state oversight and regulation of the finances of churches and other places of worship.

Despite continuing measures against unofficial congregations, known as "house churches", the number of Christians continues to rise, estimated at around 150 million. The intensity of persecution varies across the country, often initiated at provincial or city

level but in the knowledge of the CCP's approval. Many house churches have been closed and members arrested. Crosses have been removed from churches, and Biblical paintings or Scriptures replaced with portraits of President Xi Jinping or his quotes.

The CCP's high-tech surveillance systems continue to target non-atheist minorities. A sustained campaign of persecution has seen tens of thousands of Muslim Uyghurs interned in "re-education" camps in Xijiang province. At the 20th CCP National Congress in October 2022, President Xi was chosen to lead for a third term, suggesting that existing repressive policies against Christians are likely to continue.



An Internet religious information service licence examination being conducted in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region

Pray that Christians will grow in resolve and strength even as restrictions against them are tightened. Ask that God will give wisdom to church leaders in how to respond to new regulations. Pray that authorities will see Christians as a force for good and harmony in Chinese society.

D.R. Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a Christian-majority (around 90%) land of great suffering. The country suffers continual violence caused by the ongoing conflict between the rebel Congolese Revolutionary Army (also known as M23) and the DRC government. Christians also suffer from Islamist brutality.

Islamist violence is most acute in the provinces of Ituri and North Kivu in north-eastern DRC, which have been in an official state of emergency since May 2021. Here Christian communities are targeted by jihadi group the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), thought to be linked to Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh).

In March, April and May 2022 at least 136 people were killed by ADF jihadists in the two provinces. In October 2022 a pastor was among 11 people killed in an ADF attack on a Christian village.

The persistent violence has forced many to flee over the border into Uganda. In April 2022 a Ugandan church leader said that Islamists were “mercilessly killing Christians” in DRC. Twelve months earlier a church leader had warned of ADF’s strategy to “kidnap and force victims to join the Islamic faith”.

DRC has rich mineral deposits, including the world’s largest reserves of cobalt, but this has become the cause of much hardship rather than prosperity. Desperately impoverished people risk

their lives in dangerous unofficial mines trying to find the cobalt. Even the official, regulated mines are highly unsafe. Child labour is common – of 255,000 miners in the DRC it is estimated that 40,000 are children.

The mines remain places of violence – church leaders who seek to minister to the miners face fearful reprisals if they are seen to disrupt work. Efforts to reform the sector have led to little if any change.



Barnabas-funded food aid is distributed to internally displaced Congolese Christians

Ask the Lord to bring to an end jihadi violence in DRC, so that Christian communities can live and worship in peace. Pray for the success of efforts to reform and better regulate mining.

Egypt

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi made history in February 2022 by appointing the first Christian to the post of President of the country's Supreme Constitutional Court. This made Judge Boulos Fahmy Eskandar, 65, the country's highest judge. The appointment of a Christian to such a high position in a Muslim-majority country is rare, and exemplified President al-Sisi's long-term support for his country's Christian minority.

Christians, who make up 10% of the population, say their situation is better now than it has been for years. President al-Sisi has been swift to give verbal and practical backing to the Christian community whenever anti-Christian incidents occur. Al-Azhar University now controls most of the mosques so that the extremist Muslim Brotherhood has become less influential.

Another change was the government's decision to pass the 2016 Law for Building and Restoring Churches, which repealed Ottoman-era restrictions that made it almost impossible for churches to obtain a licence, forcing many congregations to worship illegally. At the time of writing, 2,526 out of the 3,730 churches that applied for registration have received licences, which leaves 1,204 awaiting processing.

The licensing authorities have worked closely with churches to improve fire safety measures following the tragic deaths of 41 people, including 18

children, in an accidental church blaze at Giza, near Cairo, in August 2022. President al-Sisi also pledged financial support for the bereaved and funding to reconstruct the church.

While attitudes are improving, some hostility towards Christians remains at local level, particularly in rural areas. In June 2022 Muslim extremists in al-Halla village, Luxor, attacked a church, which had operated peacefully as an unregistered place of worship since 2003, and the homes of Christians. The extremists were enraged after the church was granted a licence followed by the stationing of guards outside it (standard government procedure to protect registered churches).



Barnabas has provided 4,791 Egyptian Christian children with the gift of a Bible

Give thanks for the support of President al-Sisi, and the change of attitude from the authorities towards Christians. Ask for guidance for Judge Boulos in his role. Pray that harmony will be restored in al-Halla.

Eritrea

Conditions are so harsh for Christians in Eritrea that the country is often described as Africa's North Korea.

The Marxist government exercises a tight grip on the population, which is roughly half Christian and half Muslim. It legally permits only three Christian denominations – Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran – as well as Sunni Islam.

Having official recognition does not, however, guarantee freedom from intimidation and harassment. In February 2022, Abune Antonios, deposed as patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church for denouncing government interference in the Church, died after 16 years of house arrest. He was 94 and, like thousands of other detainees, had never been charged.

Christians from prohibited denominations are subjected to arbitrary arrest and lengthy terms of imprisonment often without charge or trial. They are frequently beaten, starved of food and water, held in degrading and overcrowded conditions, tortured and forced into hard labour. Pastors and theological students in detention are singled out for extra punishment or extended sentences.

Only the Lord knows how many Christians are being held in Eritrea, but persecution continues. In March 2022 the authorities rounded up 29 evangelical Christians (12 men and 17 women) as they prayed in a private

house in the capital Asmara and took them to the Mai Srwa maximum security jail. Tens of thousands of Eritrean Christians have fled persecution, many seeking refuge in Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and Israel.

The Eritrean military has been accused of carrying out atrocities against the ethnic Tigrayan population, which is almost entirely Christian, in neighbouring Ethiopia. Troops are alleged to have taken part in killings of civilians, rape and looting.



Barnabas funds therapy sessions to help traumatised Eritrean Christian mothers and their children who have fled persecution in their homeland to Israel

Pray for the protection and patient endurance of all Christians in Eritrea. Ask that their loving and compassionate spirit will convict even those in authority to turn from their repressive ways to the Living God.

Ethiopia

Around two-thirds of Ethiopia's population is Christian and one-third Muslim. The Ethiopian constitution establishes freedom of religion and stipulates that the state shall not interfere in the practice of religion.

Ethiopia has been experiencing one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters. This is the result of both violent conflict in the Tigray region that has spread to other regions and the ongoing drought that has caused desperate hunger across the Horn of Africa – in 2022 parts of Ethiopia suffered the worst drought ever recorded.

As of early 2023, more than two million people had been displaced from their homes; an estimated nine million people were at risk of famine; and in total 20 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance.

The conflict began in November 2020 when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered a military offensive against the Tigray People's Liberation Front, in response to an attack on a government military base.

Tigrayan Christians have suffered torture, rape and forced removals. Many pastors and church ministers are among the dead, churches have been destroyed or looted, and harvests razed. Soldiers from neighbouring Eritrea carried out terrible atrocities in Tigray. They are accused of the massacres of Christians in and around the historic church of Axum and in the village of Dengelat, crowded for a Christian celebration, in November

2020. Christians are also being subjected to attack in parts of Ethiopia's western Oromo region.

At the time of writing, a ceasefire that came into force in November 2022 is allowing much-needed humanitarian aid to enter Ethiopia.

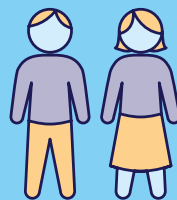
Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa, with many ethnic groups. It officially accepted Christianity in the fourth century.



Barnabas is funding the printing of Oromo-language Bibles for the growing numbers of believers among the Oromo people of Ethiopia

Pray for a permanent cessation of hostilities so that Ethiopia can rebuild, displaced people can return to their homes and aid can be received. Ask the Lord to send much-needed rain. Pray especially for Christians, that their faith will not fail despite their catastrophic circumstances.

Children



"And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them." (Mark 10:16)

Far from being shielded from the persecution their parents endure, Christian children are often on the frontline. Hostility from teachers and classmates, and pressure to convert to the majority religion, can be daily challenges. Christian pupils can be marked down or failed in exams. Many Christian parents are unable to send their children to school, caught in a poverty trap through anti-Christian discrimination.

Other children have no school to go to, being refugees fleeing persecution, famine or conflict. Many Christian children in Burkina Faso, displaced by terrorist violence, find that no school will accept them in their new location. Sometimes they are refused school places simply because they are Christians.

Children in Tajikistan are banned from attending Sunday school, Christian camps or any church services, even if accompanied by parents. Fines have been issued to parents not complying with the 2011 Parental Responsibility Law, which prohibits anyone below the age of 18 from taking part in religious events except funerals. Pupils in North Korea are encouraged at school to report on their Christian parents if they see them praying or reading the Scriptures.

The lives of Christian children in Buddhist-majority Myanmar have been cruelly cut short by shelling on several occasions in 2022. In March, three siblings, brothers aged 7 and 10 and their 12-year-old sister, were killed in an attack on a village in Kayah State. Children are often among the many victims of Islamist attacks in Nigeria's Middle Belt.



Receiving a Christian education significantly boosts children's prospects of escaping the cycle of poverty and illiteracy that traps so many Pakistani believers

Pray that all children of persecuted Christian families will know the Good Shepherd's protection as they grow up and not be deprived of opportunities to learn and develop. Give thanks for the Christian schooling many poor Christian children are receiving in Pakistan with help from Barnabas. Ask that they will grow strong in their faith even when the rest of their family does not believe.

Indonesia

In recent years Islamism has grown in Indonesia, though the government is working to combat extremism and re-assert the state philosophy of “Pancasila” that created a society of marked religious tolerance until a few decades ago.

President Joko Widodo’s government has successfully dissolved two hard-line Islamist organisations (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and the Islamic Defenders Front). However, a new group – the Islamic Reformist Movement – allegedly funded by Saudi Arabia, has since emerged.

During Christmas 2021 the government deployed almost 180,000 police officers to protect public places, including churches, from attack.

Hostility from Muslims towards Christians varies across Indonesia, a vast country comprising thousands of islands. Although central government is often supportive of Christians, provincial and local authorities may be hostile. Hostility is most severe in the semi-autonomous province of Aceh, the only province governed by sharia (Islamic law).

In September 2022 a church in Cilegon, Banten province, was refused permission to construct a new building by local authorities. This refusal was in line with a 1975 agreement but Christians and moderate Muslims argued in 2022 that the agreement should no longer apply. Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, a Muslim and Minister of Religious Affairs, criticised the decision.

Yaqut had previously promised to combat “Islamic populism”.

Muhammad Kace, an Islamic cleric who became a Christian, was in October 2021 brutally beaten by fellow prisoners after being arrested for alleged “blasphemy”. He was sentenced to ten years in prison (subsequently reduced to six).

A 2006 decree forbids religious services in private residences and requires places of worship to have at least 90 members and approval from 60 households of other religions before constructing their own building. An attempt by Christians to overturn the decree was rejected by the Supreme Court in June 2020. Implementation is the responsibility of local authorities, and the decree is not consistently enforced.



Muhammad Kace is serving a six-year sentence for “blasphemy”

Pray for God’s protection over His people, especially in areas where hostility is greatest or terrorists are active. Give thanks for the stance of central government against extremism and ask that moderate voices in Indonesian society will be heeded.

Iran

Iran has been an Islamic Republic since the 1979 revolution. The world's leading Shia Muslim country has been ruled by an Islamic cleric, Supreme Ruler Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, since 1989.

Historic Assyrian and Armenian Christian minorities, whose languages are not understood by the majority Muslim population, are allowed to worship in their own languages. Christian worship in the national language of Farsi (Persian) is forbidden, as is evangelising Muslims. Farsi-speaking Christians are converts from Islam and therefore punished as apostates in line with Sharia (Islamic law), which is rigorously enforced in Iran.

Hardliner Ibrahim Raisi's appointment as president in August 2021 demonstrated every likelihood of such a policy being maintained. The Christian convert community, however, continues to grow, from a handful of believers in 1979 to hundreds of thousands.

The authorities often charge converts with "acting against national security" and engage in exhausting them psychologically by continually releasing and re-arresting them in order to push them to flee abroad or return to Islam. Iranian intelligence officers regularly force arrested converts to sign an agreement promising never to meet with other Christians again after their release.

In August 2022 a pastor and four female converts lost appeals against jail terms and fines for involvement with

"house churches". Pastor Shahbazian's ten-year sentence will be followed by a two-year ban on travelling abroad and two years of internal exile. Pastor Anooshavan Avedian was similarly sentenced in April 2022, and two members of his congregation were internally exiled.

Prayers were answered in October 2022 when Naser Navard Goltapeh was unexpectedly released mid-way through a ten-year sentence for running a "house church" and alleged links to Christian groups outside Iran.



Naser Navard Goltapeh's release from Evin Prison, Tehran came five years after he was arrested during a police raid on a church meeting in July 2017

Pray that God will renew the strength of Christians in prison and those forced to flee Iran. Ask that new Christian leaders replacing those exiled or jailed will be given wisdom to shepherd the Lord's people. Pray also that Farsi-speaking Christians will be permitted to worship freely in their own language.

Iraq

Huge numbers of Christians fled Mosul and the Plains of Nineveh – the historic centre of Iraqi Christianity – following their conquest by Islamic State (IS – also known as ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) in 2014. In a three-year reign of terror against Christians and other minorities, IS seized Christian-owned properties, looted and destroyed churches, and subjected believers to sexual violence, forced conversions and enslavement. These acts constituted crimes against humanity and war crimes, a team of international investigators reported in December 2022.

Relatively few Christian families have returned to the region because of continuing concerns over the security situation. IS was officially declared defeated in Iraq in 2017, yet its cells continue to stage attacks in the country.

Those Christians who have ventured back are encouraged by the rebuilding of churches – sometimes with the help of Muslim volunteers – and hope their reopening will embolden more believers to return.

Christians face an uncertain future, however, because many of their homes were destroyed or fraudulently sold. In February 2022 more than 120 buildings and properties stolen from Christians and Sabians (a religious minority indigenous to Iraq) were given back to their rightful owners. It followed a review carried out by the Committee for the Restitution of

Christian and Sabeian Property, set up in early 2021 by Muslim cleric Muqtada al-Sadr who stated the initiative aimed to restore justice to his “Christian brothers”.

Huge numbers of Christians who fled IS took refuge in the autonomous Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. They are now facing displacement again following attacks by Iran against “dissident groups” in the area and by Turkish forces against Kurdish PKK fighters.

An estimated 75% of Iraq’s Christians (around 1.5 million in 1990) have left the country in the last 30 years, due to anti-Christian violence and hostility. It began after the 1990-91 Gulf War, intensified after the US-led invasion of 2003, and intensified further after the emergence of IS.



Christians worshipping in Iraq

Pray that Christians will find peace in Iraq among the Muslim majority. Ask for protection for our brothers and sisters in northern Kurdistan.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the largest of the Central Asian states by land mass. A quarter of its 18.8 million population are Christians. Many are from a Russian background, but some are ethnic Kazakhs who have converted from Islam.

Muslim-background Christians have long been viewed with suspicion and distrust in Muslim-majority Kazakhstan, but this hostility is increasingly directed against all believers. This situation has arisen in part because of a growing sense of Kazakh nationalism that is linked to Islamic identity.

Kazakhstan's constitution guarantees freedom of religion. However, a Religion Law passed in 2011 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 unlawfully. The law also prohibits evangelising.

In 2018 the government approved amendments imposing even harsher restrictions, including a ban on religious teaching unless within a registered organisation – effectively making religious discussions in private homes illegal. Further restrictions on holding one-off religious events away from a regular place of worship were added in 2022. These include the requirement to seek permission for

such an event at least ten working days in advance, as well as providing details about how many people will attend and how they will travel to the event.

A church in Almaty Region has had its bank accounts frozen almost continuously since April 2017 because a donation from abroad towards the purchase of a new church building was flagged as “suspicious”.

In early 2022 Kazakhstan suffered a wave of protests and riots that led to the deaths of more than 200 people. Protests began on 2 January over rising fuel prices, but rapidly expanded into wider anti-government demonstrations. In November 2022 the sitting president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, was re-elected in a landslide victory.



Kazakh Christians praying

Ask the Lord to help Christians in Kazakhstan navigate onerous government regulations and pray for increased religious freedom. Pray for all those who face hostility and suspicion because of their faith, especially converts from Islam.

Kenya

Kenya is 80% Christian and 12% Muslim. The country has a constitutional commitment to religious freedom, but Christians in the Muslim-majority coastal areas and north-east, the latter of which is home to many Somali Muslims, are vulnerable to Islamist extremism.

The Somalia-based Islamist group Al Shabaab has declared Kenyan Christians an enemy to be subjugated, converted or eradicated. Al Shabaab began operations in Kenya in 2011 after the Kenyan government sent troops into Somalia to counter terrorist activity.

Numerous bus attacks have been carried out in the north-east near the Somali border with passengers robbed, often murdered. Typically, non-local passengers are singled out, assumed to be Christians. In 2012 Al Shabaab recognised a Kenyan terrorist group, Al Hijra (formerly known as the Muslim Youth Centre or MYC), as its affiliate in the country. Al Hijra is active in the coastal regions.

Al Shabaab's most notorious action was at Garissa University in 2015 where the group massacred 148 students, mainly Christian. In August 2022 the group declared, "We will continue to concentrate our attacks on Kenyan towns and cities as long as Kenyan forces continue to occupy our Muslim lands."

Large parts of northern Kenya have been severely affected by drought as, at the time of writing, rains have failed for

five consecutive seasons. The drought was declared a national disaster by the Kenyan government in September 2021. Christians in Muslim-majority areas of the north are often excluded by local Muslim leaders from receiving aid given by the authorities because of their faith in Christ.



Barnabas Aid has funded the distribution of desperately needed food aid for thousands of vulnerable Kenyan Christians

Pray that violence against Christians in Kenya will end. Ask the Lord to protect vulnerable Christians in Muslim-majority areas and continue to provide for their needs. Pray that rains will return and lead to improved harvests, easing the burden felt by Christians in northern Kenya.

Kyrgyzstan

Around 86% of Kyrgyzstan's population is Muslim. The Christian presence dates from the seventh century, but Islam became dominant in the fifteenth century. There has been a revival of Islamic practices since the end of Soviet rule in 1991.

Persecution usually comes from the community more than the authorities, particularly in rural areas such as Issyk Kul, eastern Kyrgyzstan. In 2022 it was reported that anti-Christian hostility was growing, and increasingly directed towards those from Christian backgrounds as well as converts from Islam.

Christians face difficulties in arranging for burials in public cemeteries. In Kyrgyz culture there is great concern about what happens to the body after death; converts fear being given Islamic funerals. A decision by the State Commission on Religious Affairs that all public cemeteries must be divided into zones according to religion to allow burial space for all religious groups has not been implemented consistently.

Muslim-background believers suffer especially. Muslims often refuse to employ them, and, cut off from the support of their Muslim families, converts are likely to fall into desperate poverty.

Christians can be punished for sharing their beliefs in public and religious literature may be censored. The Religion Law (2009) prohibits “illegal

missionary activity” – any missionary or evangelistic activity by a group not registered with the government.

Churches must have 200 members in order to apply for registration, and the process can last several years. Many churches, mostly small (10-20 members), are unregistered, therefore operating illegally.

In December 2021 a new Religion Law was drafted that, if adopted, would tighten restrictions – all 200 church members must live in one region, all attend one founding meeting, and all have personal details officially notarised at that meeting. However, as of early 2023, this had not been implemented.



Christian converts from Islam in Kyrgyzstan

Ask the Lord to sustain believers if anti-Christian persecution grows, especially converts who are most at risk. Pray that more churches in Kyrgyzstan will be able to register and no longer be forced to act unlawfully.

Refugees and Internally Displaced People



"He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart." (Psalm 91:4)

Christians are often forced to flee their homes, even their countries, due to persecution.

Many Christians left Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in 2021, crossing into neighbouring countries. As converts from Islam or children of converts, they have always faced the possibility of murder or execution for apostasy. But the danger is greater since the Taliban said they will hunt down the Christians and kill them. Barnabas has so far flown 54 Afghan Christians to Brazil where they have resettled permanently in safety.

More than a million Iraqi Christians have left Iraq since the Gulf War of 1990-1. Many thousands fled from Mosul when Islamic State captured the city in 2014. Christians have also been driven from their homes in Iraqi Kurdistan by Turkish bombardment supposedly aimed at terrorist groups, but also appearing to target Christian communities. Around half a million Syrian Christians have fled their homeland since the outbreak of civil war in 2011; threats and violence from Islamist terrorists were part of the reason.

Committed to a Buddhist nationalist ideology, Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) violence has caused the displacement of many thousands of Christians.

Boko Haram and Fulani militants in Nigeria have driven hundreds of thousands of Christians from their homes, to seek shelter in other villages or IDP camps. On several occasions Christians in Laos and Vietnam have been evicted from their villages for their faith.

Many believers from north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have sought refuge in western Uganda owing to persistent Islamist violence. Jihadists from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed dozens, possibly hundreds, of Christians in the region in 2022.



Barnabas has provided emergency aid for 1,500 Christian households displaced by Islamist violence in Plateau and Kaduna states in Nigeria's Middle Belt

Pray for all Christian refugees and those displaced within their own country. Ask that they will know God as their refuge and receive His wisdom, guidance and comfort as they seek to rebuild their lives.

Laos

The tiny Christian minority of some 150,000 believers faces repeated harassment from local authorities in rural parts of Laos. Whilst the central government is more tolerant, the perception of Christianity as a Western faith makes people in rural areas highly suspicious of Christians. This hostility has been expressed in abuse, eviction from homes, imprisonment, even torture.

A “Law on the Evangelical Church”, in force since December 2019, gives Christians the right to conduct services, preach throughout Laos and maintain contacts with believers abroad. The legislation, however, has not stopped Christians being subject to abuse. In October 2022 Pastor Sy Seng Manee was found dead, bearing signs of torture. He had just started holding meetings four years after a previous arrest and imprisonment for his evangelistic preaching.

In February 2022 a Christian family group of twelve were driven from their home in Savannakhet Province because of their faith, taking refuge in a nearby forest. They were pressured by district officials to remove or amend social media posts describing their ordeal, including those showing attacks on the coffin of the family’s father in December 2021 and the burning of the family home.

In late 2022 five Christian families in Salavan Province were still awaiting new homes promised by government officials, months after their homes were

demolished in separate incidents in October 2020 and January 2021.

Religious organisations must register with the government but some churches struggle to satisfy onerous registration requirements. Local authorities sometimes ban house churches and even registered churches have had Bibles confiscated.

A 2017 decree prohibits “associations” from disturbing the “social order” or “national harmony”, but its vague wording gives local authorities such freedom to interpret threats to “social order” that Christians are often targeted.



Some of the Lao Christians who were driven from their home in February 2022

Pray that the Laos government’s commitment to freedom of worship will be enforced across the country to ensure that Christians are allowed to practise their faith in peace. Ask the Lord to provide for those who have lost homes and lands because of their trust in Him.

Lebanon

Lebanon's identity as a Christian-majority country gradually declined over the twentieth century; now only about a third of the population are Christians. The long sectarian civil war of 1975-89 still casts a shadow but an informal 1943 agreement continues that the President be a Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of Parliament a Shia Muslim.

The country is a haven to 1.5 million refugees (more than 20% of the overall population), including thousands of Christians fleeing persecution in Iraq and Syria.

A severe economic crisis has afflicted the country for several years. In November 2022, Lebanon's overall inflation rate was 142%, with food inflation at 171%. The World Bank has ranked this crisis amongst the worst globally since the mid-nineteenth century in terms of the effect on living standards.

The conflict in Ukraine in 2022 added to pre-existing factors, as Lebanon used to import much of its food and fuel from there. Many hospitals stopped all non-emergency care because of prolonged power outages and lack of fuel for their generators. Long queues formed to buy bread, and cooking oil became virtually unobtainable. The cost of fuel caused many to avoid eating food items which require lengthy cooking. People have died because they could no longer afford the medication they depended on. Children dropped out

of school as parents did not even have money for their daily travel.

Christians have been particularly hard hit, for the neighbourhoods affected by the massive explosion in the Port of Beirut in 2020 were predominantly Christian. Large numbers are leaving the country.



Antoniette and her family received food parcels from Barnabas. Barnabas Aid's Lebanese project partners help the neediest Christians, providing food parcels, soap and hygiene items, and money for medicines, electricity, heating fuel, rent and transport

Pray that the Lord will sustain Lebanon's Christians and others with essential supplies amid the ongoing economic crisis. Ask that His people will receive strength, hope and faith to endure, and that sectarian violence will not escalate further to the detriment of Christians.

Libya

Christians in Muslim-majority Libya are predominantly migrant workers and refugees, but there are also a small but growing number of indigenous converts from Islam. The exact number of Christians is unknown.

Libya has experienced chaos and civil war since the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Despite an October 2020 ceasefire and formation of a new unity government, the presidential election scheduled for December 2021 had still not taken place by the end of 2022.

In September 2022 a Christian convert from Islam was sentenced to death for apostasy. The man became a Christian around four years ago, and had been arrested several times by militias who act as law enforcement. The death sentence – which at the time of writing has not been carried out – was given because he refused to return to Islam. The law stipulating death for apostates who refuse to return to Islam was passed by the 2012-14 General National Congress (GNC). Laws passed by the GNC were subsequently abolished by its replacement, the House of Representatives – but the House of Representatives was in turn declared illegal by the Supreme Court. Converts from Islam can also suffer pressure and hostility from family and former friends.

Although Libya's interim constitution (2011) declares Islam the state religion and sharia (Islamic law) the principal source of legislation, it also guarantees

non-Muslims freedom to practise their religion and prohibits religious discrimination. However, those who share the Gospel with Muslims can face serious reprisals.

Islamist groups established themselves after Gaddafi's fall. Several thousand Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) fighters moved to Libya when ousted from Syria. Islamists target Christians for killing, kidnap, forceful conversion and sale in “modern-day slave markets”. Violence is commonplace in detention centres against Christian refugees, mostly West Africans or Eritreans.



The Church of Christ the King in Tripoli

Pray for the safety of all Christians in Libya, especially converts from Islam. Ask that the death sentence will not be carried out in the case of our brother who has been convicted of apostasy. Pray for a resolution to political uncertainty.

Madagascar



Christian-majority Madagascar is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Despite the island's considerable natural resources, more than three-quarters of the population live in extreme poverty.

Madagascar used to be known as “the Green Island”. Now it is turning red as vegetation disappears, leaving bare red sand. Years of drought followed by destructive tropical storms have devastated parts of the island, transforming swathes of land into a dust bowl.

Many have died of starvation, particularly in the south of the island where hunger is most acute. In 2022 around 1.47 million people were in need of emergency food assistance in the south and around 309,000 children were at risk of acute malnutrition. Desperately hungry families have been reduced to eating cactus leaves that provide little nutrition and cause stomach pains, or to mixing ashes flavoured with tamarind, just to put something in their stomachs.

Tuberculosis (TB), easily treatable by modern medicine, has raged through the population whose immune systems are weakened by malnutrition.

Barnabas has helped to feed hungry Malagasy Christians by delivering to them 126 tonnes of nutrient-rich ePap porridge – enough for 4,158,000 meals. Fortified with vitamins, minerals and protein, ePap restores health and

strength to the malnourished and helps their bodies resist TB.

We also helped islanders in the aftermath of Cyclone Batsirai, which killed more than 120 people in February 2022. We provided construction materials to enable them to rebuild churches, pastors' homes and schools destroyed by the high winds.

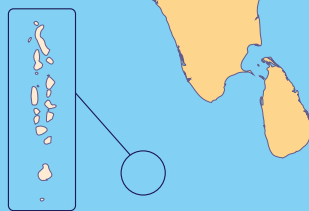
Barnabas saved more lives in Madagascar by giving seeds to 6,831 poor Christian families to enable them to grow food. Recipients, who live in an area where rain had fallen, reported 80% yields after planting the maize, bean and pumpkin seeds, which they could not afford to buy. The crops gave them food to eat and surplus to sell.



Christian farmer Finentsoa with beans grown from seeds provided by Barnabas

Pray that the Lord will work mightily to provide for the hungry at this time of need. Pray also that the faith of our Malagasy brothers and sisters will not fail.

Maldives



The Maldives consists of 1,192 coral islands spread across an area of approximately 500 square miles in the Indian Ocean. The constitution states that “a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives”. It is not clear whether a citizen who leaves Islam would have their citizenship revoked.

The Maldives’ tiny Christian population consists mainly of migrant workers from India and Sri Lanka, as well as a few indigenous converts who must live as secret believers or face reprisals both from the state and from their family and former friends.

Propagation of any religion other than Islam is a criminal offence, punishable by a prison sentence of up to five years. Maldivian Christians found with a Bible in their home also face imprisonment.

All non-Muslim worship is completely forbidden. According to Maldivian law, “Non-Muslims living in or visiting the country are prohibited from openly expressing their religious beliefs, holding public congregations to conduct religious activities or involving Maldivians in such activities.” Visitors who break the law can be fined, deported or imprisoned for up to five years.

The country’s constitution states that “no law contrary to any tenet of Islam shall be enacted in the Maldives” and, in 2016, the government passed a Defamation and Freedom of Speech Act, which criminalised comments

against “any tenet of Islam”. Anyone convicted faces a fine that can be as high as 5 million rufiyaa (\$500,000) and those unable to pay can be imprisoned for three to six months.

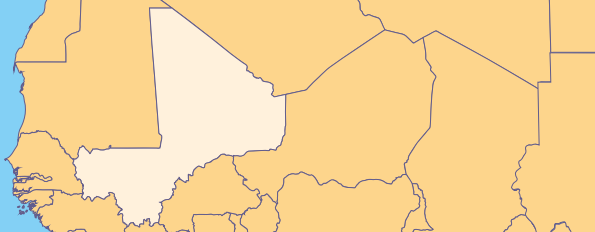
In July 2021 the Maldives Customs Service announced an investigation into increased incidents of Christian literature, including portions of Scripture, in the Maldivian language of Dhivehi being sent by post from abroad. Customs officials believe that the intended recipients had not requested the items, and closed the investigation six months later.



Minaret of Grand Friday Mosque in Malé

Intercede for Christians in the Maldives, especially converts from Islam, asking that the Lord will sustain them in their faith despite the challenges they face. Pray that, if the Lord wills, limits on religious freedom will come to an end.

Mali



Mali is a Muslim-majority country where Christians, most of them in the south, number only around 2% of the population. The constitution of Mali upholds the right to religious freedom; actions that impede this right are punishable by up to five years' imprisonment. Private Christian schools are permitted to teach Christianity rather than Islam.

Church leaders say that the government treats them as equals. Additionally, Muslim leaders have condemned what they believe to be extremist interpretations of sharia (Islamic law).

The main threat to Christians is the rise in terrorism from groups affiliated to both Islamic State (IS – also known as ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) and al Qaeda. Since 2012 jihadists have been waging a war to occupy northern and central Mali with the aim of establishing sharia throughout the country. Sometimes Christians cannot meet for worship for fear of being attacked. In May 2022 it was reported that IS forces were trying to seize control of the border between Mali and Niger.

Islamic governance is fairly popular, as many Muslims like sharia courts that deal out justice that is quick, cheap and understandable, and the low crime levels that result from sharia punishments. Islamists also provide Quranic schools in locations where there is little formal education available.

On several occasions church leaders have suffered abduction by suspected Islamists. In June 2021 five Christians, including a church minister, Leon Dognon, were abducted in Bandiagara. He was held for more than three weeks even though the others were released after two days. In September 2021 Pastor Emmanuel Goita was abducted in Koutiala and released three weeks later. In November 2022 a German church minister, Hans-Joachim Lohre, was abducted in the capital, Bamako – at the time of writing he has not been released.

In October 2022, French forces completed their withdrawal from Mali. This could further destabilise Mali and the wider Western Sahel region.



Christians in Mali are vulnerable to Islamist extremism

Give thanks that the government of Mali is treating Christians as equal citizens. Pray that the Lord will protect believers from Islamist violence amidst growing instability and sustain them in their faith.

Pastors and Evangelists



"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." (Hebrews 13:7)

Full-time Christian workers around the world are responding to the call to share the Gospel and build up the Body of Christ. They live very simply, and their ministry can be very lonely and dangerous.

Pastors ministering in areas where Christians are the minority are routinely targeted for attack. In January 2022 gunmen on a motorcycle fired through a car window and shot dead lay pastor William Siraj, after he had preached at a Sunday service near Peshawar, Pakistan.

Pastor Vitus Borogo, 50, was killed while working on his farm in Kaduna State, Nigeria in June 2022. John Cheitnum, co-ordinating chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria in southern Kaduna, was killed by kidnappers in July. In the same month, Pastor Daniel Umaru was hospitalised with gunshot wounds and both his sons shot dead in a raid on his family home in Adamawa State. Pastor Bun Fon Dong was kidnapped from his Plateau State home in September. Church minister Victor Ishiwu was abducted after gunmen disrupted a service he was conducting in Enugu State in November.

Severe government restrictions affect Christian leaders in several countries. In Iran, those active in evangelism or leading house churches receive especially

long prison sentences. Pastors receive particularly harsh treatment in Eritrea, where Christians are often detained indefinitely, usually without trial.

Church leaders in impoverished or other Christian-minority contexts often struggle to access theological training. This can be a particular problem where young believers find themselves called into positions of responsibility and oversight quite early in their walk with the Lord, or in countries where the authorities require church ministers to have advanced qualifications in order to carry out their work lawfully.



Pastor Akram had the joy of baptising Anwar in rural Pakistan

Ask the Lord to sustain pastors, evangelists and church planters as they share His Word in hostile and often violent environments. Pray that they will know His wisdom and strength as they build His Church.

Mozambique



Since 2017 militant Islamists have been waging a brutal campaign in northern Mozambique against both Christians and moderate Muslims who refuse to join their cause. Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama – known locally as Al Shabaab (but with no links to the Somalia-based group) – killed nearly 6,000 people and displaced 950,000 between October 2017 and the end of 2022.

Beheading, skinning and cutting off the limbs of their victims are the group's typical methods, with one expert commenting, "What they do to the people they capture and kill I have never seen anywhere in Africa."

The worst-affected area is the province of Cabo Delgado, nicknamed "the land of fear". Several Christians were beheaded in June 2022, and two others beheaded in an Islamist attack on their minibus in August. At least 21 Christians were killed in violent attacks throughout Cabo Delgado in October 2022 alone.

The violence has also spread into the neighbouring province of Nampula, where a Christian was decapitated in June 2022. In September six others were killed in three days of attacks across the province, in which three church buildings and at least 120 houses were burned down.

In late 2022 it was reported Al Shabaab makes about two attacks every week, burning houses, killing people, raping women and kidnapping boys to serve as child soldiers. The militants

launch attacks in one area in order to draw in security forces and leave other areas defenceless.

In November 2022 the Islamists issued a demand that Christians and Jews pay a jizya tax to the Islamic State. This, according to classical Islam, is a tax paid by subjugated non-Muslims and would mean Christians accepting their status as dhimmi – "People of the Book" (that is, Christians and Jews) who have been subjugated by Muslim conquerors.



One of many Christians displaced by violence in northern Mozambique

Lift up to the Lord the suffering Christians of Mozambique. Pray that the hand of Islamist extremists will be restrained, and that there will be peace both for our believing brothers and sisters and for moderate Muslims who do not want to join the jihadi cause.

Myanmar

For decades the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) has persecuted the country's small Christian community, estimated at 6.2% of the population, for their faith and ethnicity. Attacks against the Christian-majority Chin, Kachin and Karen ethnic groups – and other groups with significant Christian minorities, including the Kayah (Karenni) people – have increased again since the military overthrew the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in a coup in February 2021.

The military represents the dominant national identity of ethnic Burman (or Bamar) Buddhists – Myanmar is 68% Bamar and 88% Buddhist. Many Christians have been killed in land and air assaults on their communities, and tens of thousands of believers have been driven from their homes to seek refuge in the jungle.

Some have been forced to flee more than once. Many Christians have crossed into Thailand or India. Even camps for internally displaced people within Myanmar are not safe; a 13-year-old girl and her father were killed by a Tatmadaw shell at a camp in Kayah State in July 2022. In March 2022 the US Commission on International Religious Freedom likened the treatment of Christians by the Tatmadaw to the genocide the military has perpetrated against Myanmar's Muslim-majority Rohingya since 2017.

Amnesty International, in a report dated May 2022, described atrocities against Karen and Karenni civilians in Karen and Kayah states as “likely amounting to crimes against humanity”. Amnesty reported widespread use of arbitrary detention, torture and extrajudicial executions of civilians.

In March 2022 a Kayah aid group estimated that 10,000 people sheltering in the jungle were at risk of starvation because of military roadblocks. In June Christian-majority Chin said they were being excluded from receiving international aid because distribution was being administered by the military.



Barnabas has provided food and practical aid for tens of thousands of displaced Christians. This elderly man was found in the jungle, where he had fled, by one of our project partners

Pray for an end to the violence carried out by the military against Christians and others in Myanmar. Ask for the Lord's protection for His people and all who are forced to flee attack. Pray that aid supplied by Barnabas will continue to get through to displaced Christians.

Niger



Niger is a very poor country grappling to curtail a surge in Islamist terrorism on three of its borders. The rise in attacks by jihadists against civilians makes Niger an especially dangerous place for Christians, who comprise about 0.4% of the population, which is 98% Muslim.

Groups affiliated to Al Qaeda and Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) are active on Niger's western borders with Mali and Burkina Faso, while the Nigeria-based Boko Haram operates on Niger's south-western frontier.

The 2022 Global Terrorism Index attributed 588 deaths in Niger to terrorists, the highest in a decade. The majority of the killings took place in Tillabéri province, where most churches are situated. The province includes the capital Niamey and lies on Niger's western border. In the deadliest assault, gunmen from Islamic State West Africa Province stormed into a Tillabéri village on motorbikes, killing 70 civilians.

At the time of writing, it was estimated 348,000 Nigeriens had fled their homes because of the insurgency. Another 294,000 were refugees escaping Islamist violence in Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria. The crisis has exacerbated food shortages caused by poor rainfall and more than 3.7 million were estimated to need humanitarian assistance. More than 855 schools had been shut because of conflict.

The rise in terrorism in Niger is part of an increase in violence across

the Sahel region, with similar surges in Mali and Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire (the Ivory Coast) also at risk. The crisis, which began in Mali with an Islamist uprising in 2012, has forced more than 2.5 million from their homes in the last decade.

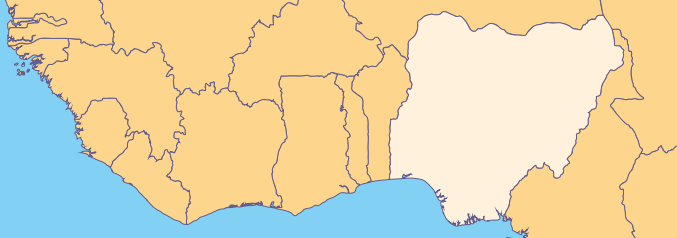
Niger has a secular constitution, which was affirmed in 2019 with a law guaranteeing religious freedom. The legislation highlighted that all are free to worship, but stated that religious observance should be exercised with respect for "public order, peace and social tranquillity".



Christians make up less than 1% of Niger's population

Pray for an end to Islamist violence in Niger. Ask that Christians will find refuge in the Lord, their fortress and salvation. Pray that their steadfast faith will draw others close to God's Word.

Nigeria



The population of Nigeria is roughly 50% Christian and 50% Muslim. The majority of Muslims live in the north, the south is mainly Christian and the Middle Belt has about equal numbers.

Persecution against Christians in the Middle Belt and the north continues unabated. Jihadi groups Boko Haram along with Islamic State West Africa Province and Islamist Fulani militants are relentless in their attacks on Christian communities, killing and kidnapping villagers. Even by conservative estimates, more than 10,000 Christians nationwide have been killed in Islamist violence since 2015 – and the true total could be higher.

“In our country, death has become a daily meal,” a church leader lamented in June 2022. An attack survivor commented “I am tired of running” after Islamist militants killed three Christians in March 2022 in another assault on his village in Borno State. “The insurgents always come back another day and do whatever they want,” he added.

In one of the worst onslaughts of 2022 at least 80 people were killed, 60 abducted and 115 homes razed when gunmen attacked Christian-majority villages in Plateau State one Sunday in April. A Barnabas contact said afterwards it was clear that Christians and their villages are the target for “slow extermination”.

In June 2022 violence spread to Ondo in the south-west, one of Nigeria’s

most peaceful states, when gunmen killed at least 40 Christians gathered at church on Pentecost Sunday.

At the time of writing, tensions in Nigeria were rising as the country prepared for a general election on 25 February 2023. Nigerian presidential candidates normally choose a vice-presidential running mate from the other religious community; however, All Progressive Congress candidate Bola Tinubu, a Muslim, announced another Muslim as his running mate, sending shock waves through Nigerian politics. The Christian Association of Nigeria denounced it as a “declaration of war”.



Barnabas has provided food and practical aid to thousands of Nigerian Christians displaced by Islamist violence

Pray for the Lord’s mighty protection over His people, and ask that they remain steadfast in their faith throughout these difficult times. Ask that the plans of the men of violence will be thwarted.

North Korea



North Korea's perennial label as the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian is regularly reinforced by compelling testimony. Under the despotic rule of Kim Jong-un and strict communist control, the closed country follows the state ideology of *Juche*, or “self-reliance” established by his grandfather, Supreme Leader Kim Il-sung. Yet until 1945, Pyongyang – now the capital of North Korea – had remained the stronghold of Korean Christianity, with the city termed the “Jerusalem of the East” after a Protestant revival in 1907.

North Korea's *songbun* system classifies citizens according to their perceived loyalty to the state. Religious practitioners are identified as belonging to the “hostile” class and are considered enemies of the state, worthy of discrimination, punishment and isolation, and in some cases, execution. Christians have even been executed for the “crime” of owning a Bible.

The United Kingdom's All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea concluded in its 2021 report that the atrocities against Christians in the country could amount to genocide.

In June 2022 a joint report by the International Bar Association and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, based on testimony of former detainees, confirmed that detention periods were longer for Christians than other groups. Witnesses reported that Christians are subjected to some

of the worst forms of torture to force them to incriminate others during interrogation. One Christian prisoner who was repeatedly beaten at a labour camp asserted, “I am God's daughter. I am crying because I am worried that God will be in pain seeing his daughter being assaulted in prison.”

There is close collusion between the communist authorities in North Korea and neighbouring China over the arrest, punishment and forced repatriation of Christians who cross North Korea's only active border.



An underground church in North Korea, date unknown. North Korean Christians are classified as enemies of the state

Pray that Christians will know God's protection as they face danger daily, especially as they gather in secret. Ask for His strength to sustain those experiencing death, torture and abuse in the labour camps.

Pakistan

Christians in Pakistan – around 3% of the population – suffer frequent discrimination and occasional persecution at the hands of the Muslim majority.

Non-Muslims are particularly susceptible to accusations under Pakistan's infamous “blasphemy” laws, which include a mandatory death sentence for defiling the name of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam (though this has not yet been carried out). At least 15 Christians accused of “blasphemy” have been murdered by zealous Muslims. Their families and whole Christian neighbourhoods are also at risk of mob violence.

Usually in “blasphemy” cases the higher courts overturn the decisions of lower courts after the accused has spent years in prison. But in June 2022 the Lahore High Court upheld the death sentences of two brothers, both Christians, for alleged “blasphemy”. The following month another Christian was sentenced to death for “blasphemy” by a lower court in Lahore.

The Supreme Court has recognised that these laws are misused, often to settle personal grudges. The court declared in September 2022 that preaching Christianity “is not a crime”, and raised issues such as false and malicious accusations, the typical lack of credible evidence, and the risk of violence to the accused.

Non-Muslim girls and young women are vulnerable to being abducted by

Muslim men and forced both to marry their captors and convert to Islam. The authorities are often reluctant to intervene.

Christians often experience great poverty owing to discrimination in employment and education. Many work in low-paid, dirty, dangerous jobs such as cleaning sewers, due to limited employment opportunities. Lack of educational opportunities leads to widespread illiteracy.

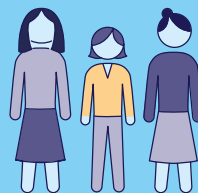
Prime Minister Imran Khan was removed from office in a no-confidence vote in April 2022. Khan's government had opposed discrimination against religious minorities and appointed a Special Representative on Religious Harmony. Many Christians were concerned that progress made by Khan's government might be lost.



Barnabas supplied aid to Christians affected by the devastating 2022 floods

Lift up to the Lord Pakistani Christians who suffer daily discrimination and hostility. Pray that the voices of moderate Muslims regarding “blasphemy” will be heeded. Ask that the authorities will take seriously the abduction of young women and girls.

Women



"Then he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.'"
(Luke 8:48)

In places of persecution and marginalisation, where Christians suffer for their faith, Christian women are especially vulnerable. Christian widows in such contexts, as well as women whose husbands are in prison, are often left with little or no income to support themselves and their children. This is especially so for converts. Poor widows bereft of their husbands' protection often face strong pressure from their Muslim families to convert to Islam.

Some Muslims label Christian women "immoral" and therefore deserving of abuse. 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). At the time of writing a Pakistani Christian girl called Meerab Abbas has been missing for two years since she was abducted at the age of only 12. This is just one case of many similar cases, although Meerab was unusually young.

More than 100 of the 276 girls, mostly Christian, abducted by Boko Haram Islamists from their school in Chibok, Nigeria, in 2014 remain in captivity. An estimated 167 girls have escaped, been rescued or released. Seven were discovered between June and October 2022, all now with

children of their own, having been forced into marrying their captors. Two other Chibok schoolgirls, cousins Lydia Pogu and Joy Bishara, celebrated completing master's degrees in the United States in 2022. They had been told by their Boko Haram captors that education for women was forbidden.



Ruth Bitrus, 24, Hanatu Musa, 26, Kauna Luka, 25 (pictured with their children) were among seven "Chibok girls" recovered in 2022 after years of Boko Haram captivity

Lift up Christian women and girls who are marginalised, despised and persecuted because of their faith and gender. Pray especially for Christian widows, that the Lord will be their Protector and their Provider and will comfort all who mourn and are lonely.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and the site of its holiest cities, Mecca and Medina.

The kingdom's constitution is based on the Quran and the words and deeds of Muhammad, the Islamic prophet. The judicial system operates according to strict sharia (Islamic law).

It is a capital offence to leave Islam, although the sentence is not known to have been carried out in recent times. Only the Lord knows the number of Saudi nationals (converts from Islam) who are secret believers.

No non-Muslim public religious buildings are allowed. Christians among the many expatriates working in the kingdom are forbidden to make public display of their faith. They are permitted to gather in private for worship, but in practice these gatherings are subject to raids by the religious police.

Blasphemy also carries a potential death penalty, and blasphemy charges are used to suppress free speech, including on social media.

The kingdom promotes its strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam worldwide and has provided massive financial support to Islamist groups abroad. Oil money is funnelled through various networks into dawa (Islamic mission) projects across the world.

Reforms are being introduced by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. They include a reduction in powers of the religious police, an expansion in women's rights, and

the removal of some material in school textbooks which had taught intolerance of non-Muslims. In 2020 it was announced that flogging would no longer be used as a punishment for drinking alcohol or adultery, even though it is specified in the Quran.

There has also been an unofficial softening of the ban on marking Christmas and other holidays celebrated in the West. This has resulted in the unusual sight of Christmas trees and decorations openly on sale.



A 4th-century church building discovered in 1986 near Jubail, Saudi Arabia

Give thanks for the steadfast faith of secret Saudi believers and expatriate Christians who hold fast to the Lord in spite of the difficulties they face. Ask that small reforms will lead to greater freedom of worship and that Muslims will be able to follow Christ without penalty.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is suffering its worst economic crisis for decades, with food inflation rising to 93.7% in September 2022. A ban on chemical fertilisers from April to November 2021 caused a drastic drop in crop yields nationwide. Fuel and energy shortages are so severe that the schools have been closed and hospitals are struggling to function.

Christians make up 8% of the population in predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka and are represented in both the Sinhala majority and Tamil minority ethnic groups.

The Christian community comprises both families who have been Christian for generations and new converts from Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Most Christians are poor and many have suffered violence at the hands of Buddhist extremists or radical Muslims.

On Easter Sunday 2019, Islamic State suicide bombers killed at least 254 people, mostly Sri Lankan Christians in co-ordinated attacks on churches and other Christian targets. Church leaders criticised the government's slowness to investigate, with trials of suspects not yet concluded by early 2023.

Mobs led by Buddhist monks disrupt church services, sometimes backed by local officials. In January 2022 a pastor in Anuradhapura District was served with a notice barring him from holding meetings in his home. The notice erroneously asserted that express permission is required for a building to be

used as a place of worship. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has resisted churches' requests for approval documentation. Such false allegations are common.

Extremists have repeatedly disrupted Christian funerals, particularly for converts in rural areas of the Hindu-majority eastern coast region, where burial grounds are controlled by local temples.

Buddhist hardliner Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election as president in 2019 opened the door to criminalising religious conversions. However, he was ousted in July 2022 following anti-government protests at the worsening economy, replaced by his ally former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.



A Sri Lankan Christian receives Barnabas-funded aid

Pray for an end to hostility towards Christians and that they will be able to worship without threat or harassment. Ask that the Lord will provide for the many very impoverished Christians as they suffer greatly due to the nation's economic hardship.

Sudan

There remain concerns that the positive changes experienced by Sudan's Christians after the ousting of Omar al-Bashir's Islamist government in April 2019 are being undone. A military coup in October 2021 appears to be leading to a reassertion of Islamist laws, and has caused the postponement of an election scheduled for November 2022.

In June 2022 four Muslim-background believers in Zalingei, Darfur region, were charged with apostasy in accordance with Article 126 of the Criminal Code. Yet Article 126 was abolished in 2020 as part of the package of reforms designed to uphold the principle of religious freedom. Although the case was subsequently dismissed, the fact that such charges were brought indicates renewed boldness among Islamists.

In April 2022 a pastor in Gezira State was sentenced to a month's imprisonment for "disturbing the peace" after being attacked by Islamists.

Under President al-Bashir (in office 1989-2019) the Christian minority, estimated at 3%, had suffered fierce persecution. In 1994 two Christians from a tribal group that had converted from Islam in the early 1970s were executed by crucifixion for apostasy.

The transitional government – headed by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok – that replaced al-Bashir made notable reforms, including the abolition of the apostasy law in July

2020, followed two months later by the separation of religion and state, thus ending 30 years of Islamic rule and Islam's status as the official religion.

Islamists repeatedly called for the overthrow of the transitional government in an angry backlash against these reforms.

On 25 October 2021 the Sudanese military, headed by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, arrested Prime Minister Hamdok. The military then reinstated Hamdok, but his resignation in January 2022 made extended military rule and a return to Islamist governance more likely.



Sudanese Christians worshipping. Concerns of a return to persecution have been raised since the military coup of 2021

Ask the Lord to guide Sudan's Christians to contribute wisely to Sudan's welfare as they adjust to uncertain times. Pray for just, stable governance, and that the authorities will resist the calls for reimposition of a stricter form of Islam.

Syria

More than a decade of civil war has inflicted terrible suffering and hardship on Syrians. For Christians the torment has been compounded by the rise of Islamist militant groups, including Islamic State (IS – also known as ISIS, ISIL, Daesh), who kill or kidnap believers.

Around 5.5 million Syrians have fled the country to escape the conflict, which began in 2011, and 6.9 million have been internally displaced. Those who remain are cut off from outside help by sanctions. Food and medicine shortages, spiralling inflation, bombed-out homes and lack of work are among the difficulties they endure in some areas. In 2022 churches struggled to provide what little help they could in “this bleeding and financially exhausted country”.

Christians made up around 10% of Syria’s 22 million population before the war. Many were Armenian and other descendants of survivors of the Armenian, Assyrian, Greek and Syriac genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire, which peaked in 1915. Unusually for a Muslim-majority country, Syrian Christians enjoyed respect and equality until the rise of Islamist groups during the civil war.

Christians and other minority groups are threatened by Turkey’s plans to conduct new military land operations in north-east Syria. In 2022 Turkey’s fighter planes continued attacks on the Assyrian Christian

region of Tel Tamar, claiming to be targeting the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey and the US. The operations have, however, repeatedly hit Christian communities, including damaging a church and homes in the village of Tel Tawil in Tel Tamar.

For many Assyrian Christians the air strikes are a reminder of the Ottoman genocide of Christians, and the attacks suffered under IS in 2015. “Here in Syria, history is repeating itself,” said an Assyrian leader.

It is estimated that around 500,000 Christians left Syria since the civil war began, but have often faced discrimination and sometimes violence in the countries where they have sought refuge.



Children at a Christian pre-school in Syria

Pray for peace and reconstruction in Syria. Ask the Lord to give Christians the strength, hope and faith to endure.

Tajikistan

In Tajikistan the small Christian minority of less than 2% faces hostility from the Muslim majority, while the authorities place severe restrictions on the activities of all religions.

No churches have been registered in the last decade, though many applicants easily meet the minimum requirement of ten members. In May 2022 the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) announced that the government would not register any more churches, though it did not give a reason why.

A church leader reported that he had been reminded that children (those under the age of 18) “cannot have freedom of religion”. Since 2011 under-18s have been prohibited from taking part in public religious activities, except funerals. Even the presence of children on church premises can be punished severely.

A census taken in October 2020 included a question about religion for the first time since 1937, when Tajikistan was part of the USSR. There are concerns that the results will be used to track down Christians, who fear for their safety if identified. At the time of writing, the results had not yet been published.

In August 2022, furthermore, the SCRA began sending questionnaires to non-Muslim places of worship, asking for information about employees and their families, as well as details of foreign funding.

The “extremism law” (Criminal Code article 189) is used to crack down on 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. The import and distribution of religious publications must be approved by the authorities. In prisons Christians and other religious minorities are often the target for harsh treatment from officials and other prisoners.

Converts from Islam are persecuted by authorities and often subjected to violence from their relatives, or threatened with death. Many converts, and other believers, have fled the country, to escape both persecution and desperate poverty.



Tajik Christians at a church worship meeting

Ask that the Lord will sustain His people, even as the authorities increase restrictions and surveillance. Pray especially for converts who face extra hostility for having left Islam to follow Christ.

Turkey

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is open about his ambitions to spread Turkish Islamic influence, as if to re-establish the Ottoman Empire. Turkey aspires to be both the centre of a pan-Turkic empire that stretches from the Mediterranean to the Great Wall of China and the head of the Sunni Islamic *umma* (global community of Muslims). 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.

In the period from January 2019 to March 2022, Turkey deported 78 foreign pastors and their families, some on spurious national security grounds. In November 2022 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Turkey violated the rights of a Greek church by refusing to allow it to register its land. The Turkish government was ordered to pay €5,000 (\$8,350) to the church.

Christians also suffer persecution from extremists within Turkish society. In June 2022 a Christian family – the only Assyrian Christians in their village in Mardin province – were attacked shortly before a church service. The following month a Christian cemetery in the same province was discovered to have been desecrated.

The Christian community still bears the trauma of the Armenian, Assyrian and Greek genocides of the early

twentieth century, in which 3.75 million believers were killed by Ottoman Turks. Before the genocide Christians were around 20% of the population of Turkey – today that figure is less than 0.1%.

In 2020 Turkey gave political and military support to Azerbaijan in its invasion of the Christian-majority Armenian region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey has also launched bombing raids in northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, supposedly opposing Kurdish terrorist groups but seemingly targeting Christians and other minorities.



The church service in Mardin before which a local Christian family were attacked by extremists

Pray that Christians in Turkey will remain steadfast despite persecution from extremists and government pressure. Ask that Turkish church leaders will be raised up to replace those deported. Pray that any Turkish plans that threaten Christians across the world will come to nothing.

Converts



"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."
(2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV)

Many people from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions are coming to Christ around the world. Converts are often spurned by their families and communities, and face hostility and violence. Many converts, including those from African Traditional Religion and traditional beliefs in south-east Asia, are driven from their villages.

Relatives of converts from Islam may seek to kill them to restore "honour" to the family, or zealous Muslims may try to enforce sharia (Islamic law) that prescribes the death sentence for apostates.

In the few countries whose laws include the official death penalty for apostasy, it is rarely enforced and converts are most likely to be imprisoned or harassed in other ways. However, Afghan Christians, all converts from Islam, are likely to be killed by the ruling Taliban.

Joel is in his late teens and lives in northern Burkina Faso, where Islamists are waging a terror campaign, much of it targeted against Christians. Joel and his parents converted to Christianity from Islam in 2018 and were banished from their staunchly Muslim extended family. When the terrorists reached their

village, Muslim relatives reported Joel's father to them and he was killed. Joel's mother died later from starvation. Joel's Muslim family tried to force him to return to Islam but he escaped and is living secretly with a pastor.

In Vietnam 13 Hmong Christians from the same family were forced from their village by the local authorities in June 2022 for refusing to reconvert to a local animist religion. Their livestock and some goods were confiscated, and their home was attacked.



Barnabas has provided Ugandan Christian converts with sewing skills training to enable them to earn a living

Give thanks for the faith and courage of those who leave other religions to follow Christ. Pray that the joy of the Lord will be their strength in days of trial. Ask that, by their example, their tormentors will come to know Jesus as their own Saviour and Lord.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is the most authoritarian of the Central Asian states, with all aspects of public life under strict government control. All forms of religion are treated with hostility by the state, while Christians – around 9-10% of the population – also experience persecution from the Muslim majority.

The political context is dominated by a pervasive presidential personality cult, first established by former President Niyazov (in office 1990-21) and continued by his successor President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. In March 2022 Gurbanguly's son Serdar Berdymukhamedov was elected to the presidency in polls that were disputed by international observers. According to some observers, civil liberties under President Serdar have not improved.

The majority of Christians in Turkmenistan are of Armenian and Russian background, though there is a small but growing community of Muslim-background believers. Converts from Islam are usually rejected by family and former friends, and will lose their jobs. Although they face such discrimination and ongoing pressure to return to Islam, they are full of joy and thirst for the Word of God; 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. Evangelism is considered harmful to

society. Christianity is associated with negative foreign influences.

Religious meetings in private homes are banned. There are just 20 registered churches – the only places where it is legal for Christians to meet. Churches find it almost impossible to get registration. Since 2016 churches have been required to have 50 adult members in order to apply.

Police monitor church activities, raid Christian homes and arrest Christians, particularly church leaders. Unauthorised religious services or evangelism can result in a fine of approximately \$45-\$870, with the higher fines for church leaders. If imprisoned, Christians often face torture and starvation.



Christians worshipping in Turkmenistan

Ask the Lord to strengthen His people as they endure government restrictions and pressures from the community. Pray especially for converts, that they will continue in their faith despite persecution. Pray also for God's continued provision for impoverished believers.

Uzbekistan

Muslim-majority Uzbekistan is the largest Central Asian state by population, with Christians representing less than 12% of its 31.1 million people.

Officially secular, Uzbekistan was at one time the harshest Central Asian country in its treatment of the small Christian community. Although President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, elected 2016, has shown a more tolerant attitude, a revised Religion Law passed in 2021 maintained many earlier restrictions.

A ban on religious teaching without state permission was retained. A registered religious community must still submit reasons for any event, the address, date and time, number of attendees, sources of finance, and copies of any literature or audio-visual material to be used. Details of any foreign citizens attending must also be supplied. Christian evangelism or missionary work is effectively banned.

However, the number of adult members required for a church to apply for official registration (so that its activities are legal) has been reduced from 100 to 50 – but an additional restriction requires all founders (church members at time of registration) to be resident in the same city or district.

Despite this, a historic breakthrough in 2019 saw several churches registered, including one in the notoriously strict, autonomous region of Karakalpakstan. At least a

further eight churches were registered in 2020 and three more in 2022.

The main obstacle to registration is that church ministers are required to have university-level qualifications, and congregations must have their own buildings. Sometimes churches can worship legally by sharing a registered building.

Evangelical churches are growing, with many converts from Islam who face increasing ostracism and pressure from Muslim relatives. Thankfully, however, hostility towards Muslim-background believers from the state is lessening, and in mid-2022 it was reported that house meetings for converts from Islam were no longer being targeted by the authorities.



Barnabas has supplied food parcels for impoverished believers in Uzbekistan

Give thanks that more churches have been registered and Christian meetings in homes are no longer being raided by the police. Ask that other restrictions will be lifted or eased. Pray that converts who face hostility and pressure to return to Islam will remain firm in their Christian faith.

Vietnam

Vietnam's constitution states that citizens "can follow any religion or follow none" and "all religions are equal before the law". However, its communist government views any religion with suspicion, especially Christianity, which is perceived as "Western".

Most Vietnamese people are "culturally Buddhist". Some follow Cao Dai, a strongly nationalistic religion that combines elements of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism.

The 2018 Law on Belief and Religion requires authorities to protect religious freedom, but bans religious activity that could "harm social order and/or national unity". Registration is required for religious groups and activities including worship, preaching, teaching and publishing.

Christians make up around 7% of the population. Persecution varies across the country because it largely comes from local or provincial authorities – although central government often fails to intervene.

More than half of Vietnamese Christians are from ethnic minorities. The Montagnard people, from the Central Highlands, traditionally followed animistic beliefs and began to convert to Christianity in increasing numbers in the 1950s and 60s. The Hmong people, living mainly in the north-western Highlands, were led to Christ in the 1990s by an evangelistic radio station broadcasting in the Hmong language from Manila.

Both have endured persecution. Thousands have been refused household registration documents or identity cards, rendering them unable to access healthcare or schooling. Converts are kept under surveillance, intimidated, beaten and held in arbitrary detention.

Officials frequently deny permits to churches and summon leaders of house churches and new converts to "criticism sessions" in an attempt to make them publicly deny their faith. Unregistered house churches are sometimes closed and the property of Christians confiscated.

In the recent pandemic evangelical Christians in Ho Chi Minh City were accused of creating an outbreak of Covid. In a call to prayer, a church leader wrote, "Evangelical Christians in Vietnam are severely misunderstood, discriminated against and deeply hurt."



Barnabas has given food and other aid to Christians in Vietnam

Pray that Christians in Vietnam will stand firm in their faith, knowing that the Lord is their ever present help in times of trouble. Pray that the authorities will allow Christians to worship freely.

Yemen

Yemen's tiny Christian minority share in the acute suffering caused by the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

Additionally, being converts from Islam, they suffer persecution from the Muslim majority.

The civil war in Yemen, involving Iran-backed Houthi rebel forces, intensified in 2015 when a Saudi Arabian-led coalition intervened on behalf of the former government. In April 2022 the opposing sides agreed to a truce, but by the end of 2022 the peace was already beginning to break down while efforts to extend the truce had faltered.

The conflict has led to the collapse of infrastructure and services such as water supply, healthcare and education. It is estimated that 24.1 million people – around 80% of Yemen's population – are in need of humanitarian assistance. An estimated 19 million people were thought to be experiencing “acute food insecurity” at the beginning of 2023. Many children are among those who have starved to death.

Islam is the state religion, and sharia (Islamic law) the source of all legislation. Proselytising Muslims is illegal, and conversion from Islam punishable by death, although there are no known modern examples of this. Converts are also in danger from their families and communities. Christians cannot be buried in the capital, Sanaa, unless they accept a Muslim name.

Expatriate Christians can worship together, but some have been arrested on charges of “promoting Christianity and distributing the Bible”; others accused of evangelism have been expelled.

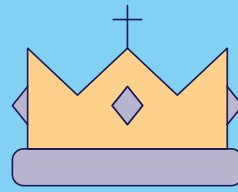
Christianity reached Yemen in 354 AD, when the country's pagan king converted after hearing the Gospel from the Roman ambassador. Yemeni Christians suffered severe persecution, from Jews and Muslims. The Islamic Caliph Umar (634-644 AD) expelled all Jews and Christians from the Arabian peninsula.



This marble plate in an ancient south Arabian script from sixth-century Yemen refers to the Holy Spirit and “Christ the victorious”

Intercede for Yemeni Christians who share in the sufferings of their neighbours and endure additional hardships for their faith. Pray for progress in bringing the civil war and humanitarian crisis to an end. Ask the Lord to help His children to endure.

Martyrs



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

Egyptian church minister Arsianos Wadid was guiding young people from his congregation on to buses after a day out to the beach in Alexandria when he was fatally stabbed in the neck. His killer, a former member of an Islamist terrorist group, shouted the Islamic affirmation, often used by jihadists when they attack, "Allahu Akbar" (God is the greatest) as he rushed at the 56-year-old in April 2022.

Christians in many parts of the world risk their lives just for following their Saviour, and some pay the ultimate price. Buddhist nationalists target Christians to preserve national purity – the persecution of Christian-majority ethnic groups in Myanmar by the armed forces has been likened to genocide. Communist governments such as North Korea perceive Christians as a threat and execute or torture to death believers.

Converts to Christianity especially can face death at the hands of family or former friends, and in some places – such as Afghanistan – are at risk of execution for apostasy. Hundreds of Christians in northern and Middle Belt Nigeria are killed by Islamist extremists each year.

In Laos Christians are mourning Pastor Sy Seng Manee who they believe was killed by the authorities in Khammouane province because of his

evangelism. The pastor's badly beaten body was found in October 2022 at a roadside. Pastor Sy had been jailed for three days in 2018 after refusing to renounce his faith and stop preaching. His murder came after he had recently resumed preaching to non-Christians. Lao Christians have the right to conduct services and preach; however, they are often subjected to harassment and violence by local authorities and extremists.



Arsianos Wadid was stabbed to death by a former member of an Islamist terrorist group

Praise God for the courage of Christians who are willing to give up their earthly lives for their faith in Him. Pray that their sacrifice will encourage others to draw closer to Jesus. Ask that the Lord will comfort all who mourn for those who died for Christ, knowing their loved ones have received the Crown of Life.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe, once regarded as the bread basket of southern Africa, has seen food insecurity and hunger increase, causing many deaths.

In 2022, 3.5 million children in this Christian-majority country were estimated to be chronically hungry. Around 60% of the population are believed to be in “acute food insecurity”.

Stunting and pellagra, conditions caused by malnutrition in children, have become commonplace. In 2022 cases of measles grew rapidly among the young as their nutrient-deficient bodies were less able to fight infection. Mothers lacking food to sustain themselves were unable to produce milk to feed their babies. Children are often too weak to go to school, despite the high value placed on education by most Zimbabweans.

Economic crises, hyperinflation and currency shortages have contributed to the emergency. The situation has been fuelled by successive droughts, Covid-19 and grain shortages caused by the conflict in Ukraine. The latest figures show 49% of Zimbabwe’s population live in extreme poverty.

The economic situation has also been worsened by misgovernment and corruption, most infamously under the authoritarian rule of President Robert Mugabe, who left office following a peaceful military “coup” in 2017. Churches and Christian groups were

among those targeted for repression under Mugabe, and many church leaders were arrested, even though the constitution guarantees religious freedom.

Corruption and human rights abuses are alleged to have continued under Mugabe’s successor, President Emmerson Mnangagwa. Churches are among those who have reported that their activities are monitored by the government.



In November 2020 Barnabas Aid’s food distribution programme began supplying hungry Christians in Zimbabwe with a special maize-based porridge called ePap. Fortified with vitamins, minerals and protein, ePap quickly restores health to malnourished children and adults. At the time of writing, Barnabas had delivered 229.5 tonnes of ePap in Zimbabwe– that’s 8,757,500 meals

Give thanks for the distribution of ePap in Zimbabwe and for the benefits it has brought to desperately needy Christians. Pray that the Lord will send rain, and for the success of planting and harvesting. Ask that freedom of religion will be sustained and increased, and that Christians will be a powerful witness of Christ’s love in dark and difficult times.

A Living Hope



"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55)

At the very moment he was about to be murdered by the religious leaders of his day, Stephen – the first Christian martyr – was shown a glorious vision of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, God the Son, ascended to the right hand of the Father.

Many believers around the world are commemorating the resurrection of our Lord this day, and all through the year Christians draw strength from the historical facts of the empty tomb and the risen Saviour.

Suffering, opposition and persecution abound – but Christ has already gained for Himself and for all His people the victory over sin, death and hell. With this living hope, believers endure in spite of war, disaster, famine, disease and persecution.

Those who live in conflict zones are assured there will be peace (Isaiah 9:7). Those who face natural disasters know that creation will be redeemed (Romans 8:21). Those without food look forward to a day when grain will cause God's people to thrive (Zechariah 9:17). The risen Christ is the evidence that all these promises will be fulfilled.

The Apostle Paul – who before his conversion approved of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1) – later wrote that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith

is futile ... we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:17, 19).

"But", Paul continues, "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:20). He is risen – He is risen indeed!



Pakistani Christian schoolchildren praying. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ brings joy to believers from every land

Give thanks for our risen Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who has borne the sins of His people and blessed them with everlasting life. Pray that a living hope in Christ will sustain the persecuted and suffering Church around the world.



Practical help for the suffering Church

Thank you for your prayers for the suffering 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 Aid. 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 suffering 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-Up Fund (reference 00-356)

Vocational Training Fund (reference PRI535)

Christian Schooling 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 barnabasaid.org or call your nearest Barnabas Aid 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 Aid office for details.



Yes, I would like to help persecuted Christians

Title	Full Name
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Email	
Constituent ID number	
<input type="checkbox"/> Please add me to your email news service (We will not give your details to anyone else)	

Here is my gift of: ☐ \$25 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$100 \$

☐ I enclose cash **or** please debit my

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Card Number

Expiry date /

Name on card

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

Tax deductible

☐ For NZ purposes (Barnabas Aid is authorised to issue tax receipts only for donations specified for use within NZ)

- ☐ PR1555 food.gives
☐ PR1570 .gives shipping costs
☐ PR1543 ePap feeding in South Africa
☐ For Overseas Project

Non-tax deductible

- ☐ For wherever the need is greatest (General Fund)
☐ PR1566 medical.gives

Description

It really helps with speed of processing your gift if your details on online internet banking transactions are set up as follows for the Payee's Statement.

Particulars

your constituent # e.g. 23-1234 or 23 1234

Code

the project/fund you are giving to e.g. General or NZ or 00-514 for child sponsorship

Reference

the frequency e.g. weekly, fortnightly, 4-weekly if you have set up a regular gift

Receipt: ☐ No receipt needed ☐ Please send receipt
(Note: To save costs, receipts will be sent by email wherever possible)

Internet banking I will donate through internet banking (Barnabas Fund Account 02 0562 0046270 97)

Regular gift I would like to give regularly. Please send me details..

Legacy gift if you would like more information about how to leave a gift to Barnabas Aid through your will, please contact our New Zealand office (left).

Please return form to Barnabas Aid NZ, PO Box 276018, Manukau City, Auckland 2241
Telephone (09) 280 4385 Email office@barnabasaid.org.nz Website www.barnabasaid.org/nz



Become a Barnabas Aid Church Partner

- ☐ Please send me information on being a Barnabas Aid Church Partner

Alternative gift card

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

"Dear

A gift of \$ has been received on your behalf

from

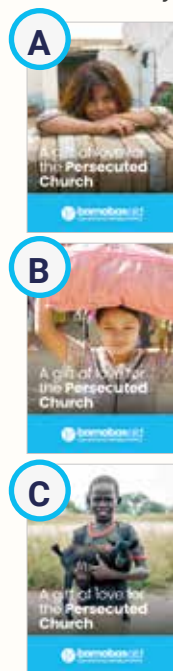
This gift will assist Christians who are persecuted for their faith. With many thanks on behalf of the persecuted Church"

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

Please state your preferred card choice (see right): ☐

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

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



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

Lent prayer diary

For those who are using this prayer booklet in Lent 2023, the following schedule of readings and prayers is suggested. It begins on Ash Wednesday, 22 February, and finishes on Easter Day, 9 April.

			22 February	23 February	24 February	25 February
			<i>Afghanistan</i>	<i>Algeria</i>	<i>Bangladesh</i>	<i>Burkina Faso</i>
26 February	27 February	28 February	1 March	2 March	3 March	4 March
<i>Victims of Violence and Injustice</i>	<i>Chad</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>D.R. Congo</i>	<i>Egypt</i>	<i>Eritrea</i>	<i>Ethiopia</i>
5 March	6 March	7 March	8 March	9 March	10 March	11 March
<i>Children</i>	<i>Indonesia</i>	<i>Iran</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Kazakhstan</i>	<i>Kenya</i>	<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>
12 March	13 March	14 March	15 March	16 March	17 March	18 March
<i>Refugees and Internally Displaced People</i>	<i>Laos</i>	<i>Lebanon</i>	<i>Libya</i>	<i>Madagascar</i>	<i>Maldives</i>	<i>Mali</i>
19 March	20 March	21 March	22 March	23 March	24 March	25 March
<i>Pastors and Evangelists</i>	<i>Mozambique</i>	<i>Myanmar</i>	<i>Niger</i>	<i>Nigeria</i>	<i>North Korea</i>	<i>Pakistan</i>
26 March	27 March	28 March	29 March	30 March	31 March	1 April
<i>Women</i>	<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	<i>Sri Lanka</i>	<i>Sudan</i>	<i>Syria</i>	<i>Tajikistan</i>	<i>Turkey</i>
2 April	3 April	4 April	5 April	6 April	7 April	8 April
<i>Converts</i>	<i>Turkmenistan</i>	<i>Uzbekistan</i>	<i>Vietnam</i>	<i>Yemen</i>	<i>Martyrs</i>	<i>Zimbabwe</i>
9 April						
<i>A Living Hope</i>						

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bringing hope to suffering Christians