

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

OCT-DEC 2019

# voice

of Persecuted Christians

## PRISONERS OF FAITH

*Serving God -  
whatever the cost*

*News, stories and prayer requests  
from persecuted Christians around the world*



# Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

**Thank you for  
supporting  
Prisoners  
of Faith**

**In this edition we focus on a number of courageous persecuted Christians who refuse to compromise their faith – whatever the cost.**

Some believers pay a high price for following Jesus: discrimination, abuse, imprisonment – and even torture.

This has always been the way of Jesus and His cross. As Jesus Himself said, 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also' (John 15:20).

As you can read in the following pages, your prayers and gifts make a vital difference, not just to individual prisoners of faith – but to their suffering families as well. Their enduring faith is

always a challenge and inspiration to our own faith and discipleship.

With remarkable composure, Iranian prisoner of faith Ebrahim Firouzi (see page 12), currently serving a five-year sentence, wrote:

'We sometimes have to sacrifice our freedom to live in God's love, so I can't think only about myself when there are so many believers suffering persecution. My freedom and getting out of prison cannot be my only purpose.'

As Kenneth Harrod reminds us on page 22: God's purposes are unstoppable. He can (and does) use persecution to further His gospel and His kingdom. Praise His name!



**Enclosed you'll find our annual catalogue of Christmas cards and selected gifts – every order directly benefits the lives of persecuted Christians.**

Christmas 2019  
[www.releaseinternational.org](http://www.releaseinternational.org)

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians

# CONTENTS

4

## FAITH UNDER FIRE

*News for your prayers*



6

## SERVING GOD - WHATEVER THE COST

*Pakistan's Christians continue  
to endure persecution*



10

## CHRIST IS SUFFICIENT

*for North Korea's believers*



12

## CRACKDOWN IN IRAN

*Pray for prisoners Ebrahim  
Firouzi and Naser Navard  
Gol-Tapeh*



14

## CALLED TO SERVE

*Can you volunteer for Release?*

15

## GOOD NEWS

*'Well done!' to our fundraisers*

16

## SAVED FROM DEATH

*Pray for prisoner of faith Ezra*



18

## PERSECUTION PERSISTS

*inside Eritrea*



20

## WISDOM FROM THE CELL

*Richard Wurmbrand's  
meditations*



21

## HEAR PETER & HADASSAH HAWK

*October speaking tour*

22

## UNSTOPPABLE

*God is sovereign*

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

# voice

of Persecuted Christians

Release helps Christians in the UK and Ireland to actively engage with their persecuted brothers and sisters around the world: praying with them, standing with them, helping them, and learning lessons of true Christian discipleship with them.

Release International: PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 4RT T: 01689 823491 E: [info@releaseinternational.org](mailto:info@releaseinternational.org)

© 2019 Release International – Registered Charity 280577 (Scotland: SC040456). The ministry of Release International Ltd, a company limited by guarantee in England, No. 1506576. Registered office: c/o Kingston Smith LLP, Betchworth House, 57-65 Station Road, Redhill, Surrey RH1 1DL. DATA PROTECTION ACT (DPA) 2018 AND EU GENERAL DATA PROTECTION REGULATION (GDPR) 2018. All personal data/special categories of personal data are processed in accordance with the DPA 2018 and the GDPR 2018. Please read our Privacy Statement published on the Release International website for full details. Stock images may be used to protect those we serve. ISSN 2632-3575.



[releaseinternational.org](https://www.releaseinternational.org)



[releaseinternational](https://www.facebook.com/releaseinternational)



[@ReleaseInt](https://twitter.com/ReleaseInt)



[releaseinternational](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)



[releaseinternational](https://www.instagram.com/releaseinternational)



Registered with  
FUNDRAISING  
REGULATOR

# Faith under fire



## Thank you for signing our China petition

When Release tried to hand in our recent petition of more than 10,000 names to the Chinese embassy in London, they would not take it – on grounds of security. They asked us to post the petition instead.

Chinese officials also refused our request for an appointment with the ambassador to explain our concerns and to call for the repeal of draconian religion laws introduced last year.

China has been highlighted as a country of concern in several recent reports on persecution, including the investigation by the Bishop of Truro, which featured research from Release International, among others.

The petition expressed deep concern at the growing and sustained campaign against the church under regulations

introduced in February 2018. Unofficial underground churches have long been a target. But now China is also closing churches that have been officially registered with the government.

*'The situation in China for Christians is deteriorating rapidly,'* said Release CEO, Paul Robinson.

*'Our partner has estimated that it is the worst it's been since the end of the Cultural Revolution.'*

*'But we know that persecution cannot stop the growth of the church, in China or any other nation. That is why we call on Christians to keep praying and acting on behalf of our persecuted brothers and sisters.'*



**Listen to a nine-minute radio report about the day at [releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org).**

## Uyghur Christians jailed

Six Christians of Uyghur descent have been imprisoned in China's Xinjiang autonomous region.

All were charged with illegal preaching, holding illegal meetings and spreading harmful books. The following received prison sentences of between five and seven years: Mehmet Abdulla, Huji Abdurehim, Maimaiti Yimingjiang, Adil Jan, a Christian doctor whose last name is Rakhman and a man identified as Brother Adil.

A number of these Christians are recent converts, and all are from the largely Muslim Uyghur people group. In recent years China has conducted a concentrated campaign to suppress Xinjiang's ethnic minorities.

**• Pray that God will comfort and strengthen all these prisoners and their families.**



Photo: Morning Star News.

## Algerian authorities close church

Christians at first thwarted an attempt to close a church building in Tizi-Ouzou, Algeria, on August 26 – until police returned a week later to seal it shut.

After hearing news of the impending closure, representatives of 33 churches filled the threatened church building for a day of prayer and worship.

Church leaders and their lawyer had argued that the order to close the church in Ighzer Amokrane was illegal – because it was not ordered by the proper governing body or court.

**• Pray that the authorities end their systematic campaign to close churches and limit Christians' freedom to worship in Algeria.**

**Sign up to Release**



# NIGERIAN BELIEVERS KIDNAPPED

Christians in Nigeria are increasingly at risk from kidnapping, reports Release partner Stefanos Foundation.

*'Kidnappers are targeting the church. It is clear that this callous crime is being directed against ministers of the gospel and their families in Nigeria,'* said Director Mark Lipdo.

*'Many families have been left in pain, trauma and anguish.'*

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Kaduna State chapter, has highlighted the increasing number of Christian families being kidnapped in the state.

In August, for example, a pastor with Living Faith

Church in Romi New Extension was killed by gunmen when his wife was kidnapped. She was later released after payment of a ransom.

In the same month Pastor Elisha Numan of Nagarta Baptist Church in Chikun Local Government Area was kidnapped with his son; and two children of another church leader were also abducted for ransom.

CAN says that hundreds of Christians have been kidnapped in the past two years and that it has paid over 300 million naira (£670,000) in ransom. *'In one village alone, the church paid 20 million naira (£49,000),'* said Chairman Rev Joseph Hayab.

**• Pray for the release of all those currently abducted, and that God will comfort all who have suffered.**



Leah Sharibu (left) with her mother. Photo: YouTube.

***The Nigerian Government confirmed at the end of August that Leah Sharibu, abducted by Boko Haram terrorists in February 2018, is still alive, and that they are continuing to negotiate for her freedom. Please keep praying for Leah's release.***

## Harassed in 143 countries

According to major new research, Christians face harassment in 143 countries. The latest Annual Pew Report uncovers a record increase in restrictions on religion imposed by many governments around the world. It also finds violence and harassment against religious groups are on the rise.

Release welcomed the report but is concerned it is behind the times on China where persecution is intensifying, and omits North Korea.

*'However, the report reinforces the excellent review of Christian persecution by the Bishop of Truro which has now been accepted by the UK Government,'* said Release's CEO Paul Robinson.

The Bishop of Truro's Review for the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) found that Christians were the most persecuted religious group in the world today. In contrast, the annual Pew Report is wider in its focus, looking at restrictions on all religions.

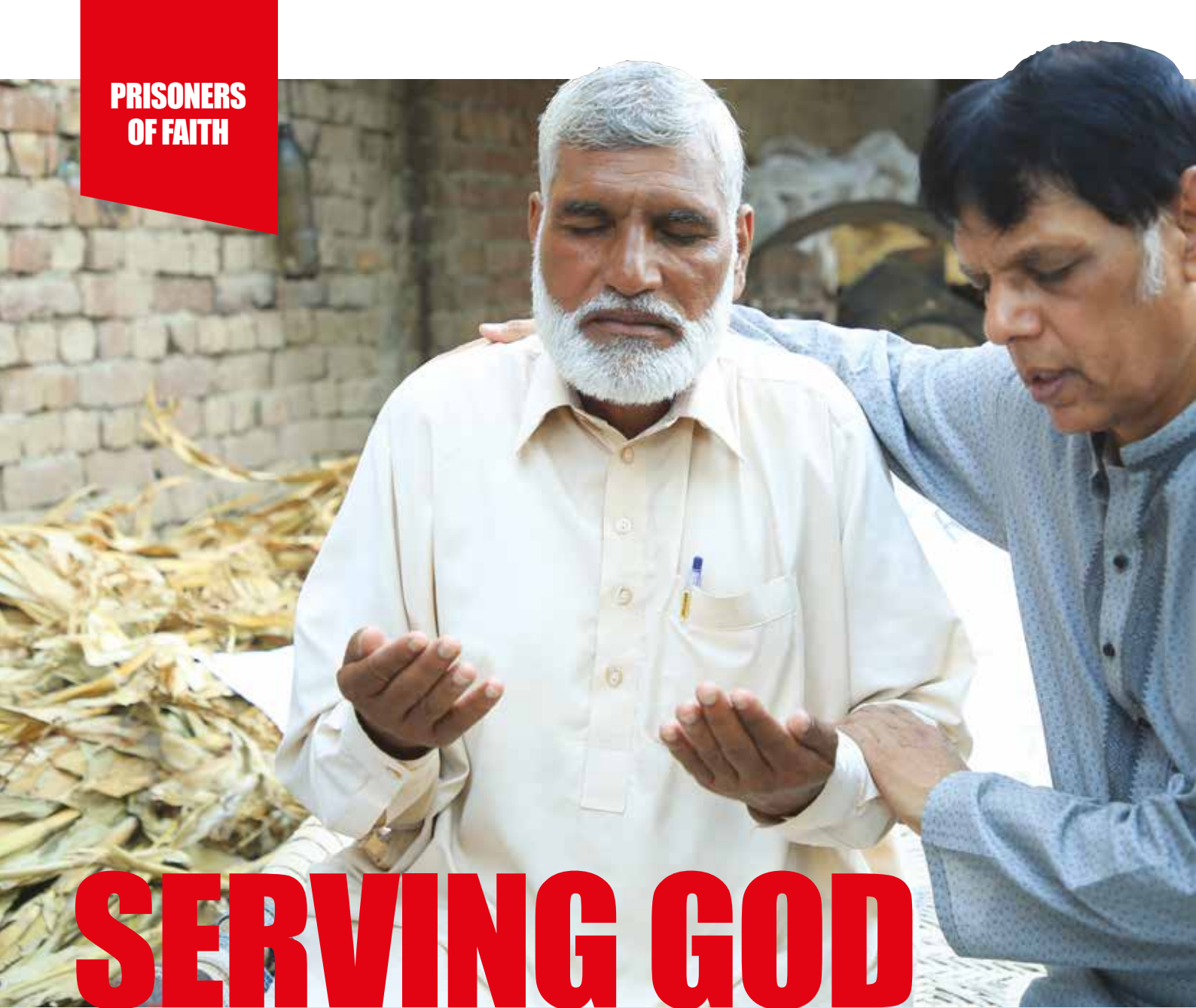
## SUPPORTER SURVEY

Thank you so much to everyone who responded to our supporter survey. The results will be hugely helpful as we decide, for example, where to exhibit and advertise next year.

We also really appreciate all the comments and suggestions you have made about our communications with you – especially about this magazine.



**Look out for the launch of our new Voice audio podcast in November. Episodes will include interviews with partners, book reviews and more. Subscribe through your favourite podcast app or download from [releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org).**



# SERVING GOD WHATEVER THE COST

*Christians in Pakistan tell us how they continue to face discrimination, persecution and imprisonment because of their active faith and ministry.*

Pakistani pastor Zafar Bhatti, 51, (pictured) has been in Rawalpindi's Adiala Central Jail since July 2012, when he was charged with sending blasphemous text messages. In May 2017 he was sentenced to life imprisonment for blasphemy – a charge he denied. The mobile phone in question was not even registered to him.

Before his arrest, Zafar worked selling medicines door-to-door and regularly during his sales presentation he would take the opportunity to read the Bible and pray with families in homes he visited. He founded and led a small NGO (non-government organisation) called Jesus World Mission to assist the poor. In July 2012, however, a local Islamic leader



Zafar  
Bhatti

filed a complaint saying he had been sent messages from an unregistered number insulting the mother of Mohammed, the prophet of Islam. He threatened that his followers would take matters into its own hands if an investigation for blasphemy was not opened.

Zafar was arrested by the police and tortured to try to extract a confession – but he still insisted on his innocence.

When the courts eventually brought



Release partner Waseem (right) prays with Pastor Waris, who was falsely accused of raping a Christian girl to discredit his ministry. See story on page 8.

Zafar to trial in May 2017 – nearly five years after his arrest – they conducted proceedings inside the prison because of security threats. Despite the lack of evidence, he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Zafar has appealed against his conviction.

At a court hearing in April this year, the judge said that there was no evidence against Zafar and that he should be released. However, the prosecution lawyer and police said they needed more time to produce evidence.

On June 19, his appeal hearing was

adjourned – for the seventh time.

*‘I have been in prison for the past seven years,’ Zafar told Release’s partner during a recent prison visit.*

*‘I have experienced many hardships and difficult times. Once I was attacked by my own prison guard. He shot me seven times because he thought that I have no right to live. Praise God that He saved me.*

*‘On another occasion, my food was poisoned – but again God saved me. I spent one month in hospital to recover. After this I have had heart problems and diabetes.’*

After numerous attempts to kill Zafar, he is now not allowed to leave his cell, even for the Christmas and Easter prayer meetings held in the jail. His family are understandably very concerned for his safety.

### ***‘I receive some support from Release, which has been a great help.’***

Nawab, wife of prisoner of faith Zafar Bhatti



Nawab

Nawab, his wife (pictured), has struggled to make ends meet since her husband’s arrest. She has been forced to send her younger children to live with their grandparents as she could not afford to keep them.

*‘My health is deteriorating day by day,’ she told our partner. ‘I take many medicines to survive. I receive some support from Release, which has been a great help. I ask all Christian friends to pray for me and for the release of my husband.’*

## **PERVAIZ AND ZAREENA MASIH**



Pervaiz



Zareena

Believer Pervaiz Masih also told Release staff how he and his family have suffered after he was falsely accused of blasphemy.

In August 2015 Pervaiz was living with his wife and three children in a small village in the Kasur district of Punjab province. He worked as a fourth-generation day labourer, and at a local brick-kiln factory.

These forms of employment are common for many of Pakistan’s Christians, the majority of whom are illiterate and poorly educated – and so easily vulnerable to abuse.

Pervaiz told Release how in 2015 he was involved in a dispute with one employer over payment. As a result, he was falsely accused of blasphemy.

### **Abused by police**

When the police were looking for Pervaiz to arrest him, they badly beat both his wife Zareena and his brother-in-law.

*‘The policemen kicked me very hard on my back and I jerked my neck,’ Zareena told us. ‘My back and neck were hurt. Now I am unable to stand properly and I cannot do my household work. I need medical treatment.’*

Continued overleaf..



*Pervaiz worked at a brick-kiln factory in Punjab province, Pakistan. Conditions in such factories are harsh and Christians are often exploited.*



## EMAIL ALERT

Use the attached card to request our free quarterly Prisoners of Faith email alert which gives details of an individual Christian prisoner, with prayer points, and information to help you write letters on their behalf.

After his arrest, Pervaiz was kept on his own in prison. *'In prison I was very upset and kept crying out to God to release me. I felt in my bones that God was with me and that He would release me.'*

Unusually for a blasphemy case, Pervaiz was released on bail after just 20 days.

Shortly afterwards, however, when he had returned to work, the family suffered further tragedy when their three-year-old daughter drowned in a water container at the brick kiln. Some believe that she was murdered by enemies of the family.

### ***'I forgive those who accused me; I forgive them from my heart'***

In January 2019 the Kasur Session Court finally acquitted him of blasphemy for lack of evidence – but today Pervaiz and his family still live in fear.

*'Now we face a lot of danger in the village; I cannot work, or travel about. I have to watch my step. My family is suffering greatly.'*

*'I forgive those who accused me; I forgive them from my heart. Please pray that Christians in Pakistan can live with their neighbours in peace, harmony and tolerance.'*

## PASTOR WARIS



***Pakistani pastor Waris recently told a Release partner how those opposed to the gospel falsely accused him of raping a Christian girl in order to stop his ministry.***

📖 I have served the Lord Jesus Christ for the past 21 years. I am responsible for caring for believers in five villages and ten brick-kiln factories around my village.

Last year I raised funds to construct a church building – but local leaders tried to stop me. However, with the help of my congregation we continued the work.

One day police came and arrested me, telling me that a rape case had been filed against myself and my brother. Later we discovered that our accusers had actually raped the Christian girl themselves.

I was so shocked because I have been living here a long time, and have a very good reputation.

I asked my family to contact Waseem [pictured page 6], a trusted Release partner, as well as pastors in the area. I was then jailed for four days.

I had to sleep on the dirty floor. The place was so smelly and unhygienic that it put me off eating any food.

I decided to sing Christian worship songs, prayed and spoke out the words of Psalm 23. On the third day, one of the police officers told me that he had appreciated my times of praying and praising which he had watched on CCTV.

On the fourth day I was taken to the District Police Officer (DPO) who would hear my case. When I arrived I was amazed to find that 100 pastors and church leaders had come to support me, as well as some local Muslim leaders who testified in my favour. Praise God!

Cleared by the DPO, I was released the next day. However, my accusers are still trying to take legal action against me. They want to ruin my ministry and force me to leave the village – which I am not going to do.

Please pray for me and my family as we serve the Lord God. Pray for my protection and that God will change the mind of those who are persecuting me. 📖



**Population:** 208 million

**Capital:** Islamabad

**Government:** Federal parliamentary republic

**Religion:** Muslim: 95.8%, Christian: 2.5%, Other: 1.7%.

The majority of Christians in Pakistan are poor and illiterate, and so are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, especially women and young girls.

The Christian minority faces continuing discrimination in education, employment and the law, making believers 'second class' citizens. Pakistan's poorly-worded Blasphemy laws have been used to make false allegations against Christians (and other minorities) - often to settle personal scores.

Despite these factors, the Christian church remains strong in faith and hope.

Sources: World Factbook, Operation World.



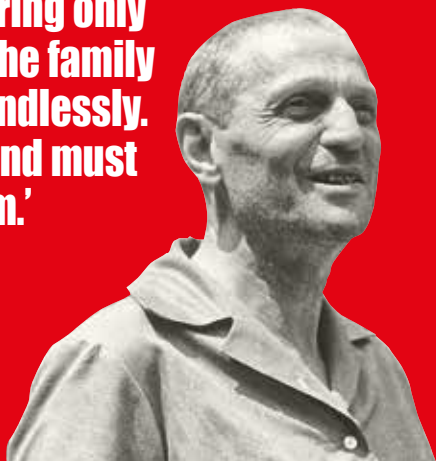
## IDOP 2019

*This year's International Day of Prayer for persecuted Christians (IDOP) takes place on Sunday, November 17.*

**As last year, the Religious Liberty Commission, of which Release is a founding member, is calling on churches in the UK and Ireland to pray for persecuted Christians throughout November.**

**To help you, Release has prepared a PowerPoint presentation about persecution in Pakistan, with topical prayers, for use in your church. Find out more at [releaseinternational.org/idop](http://releaseinternational.org/idop) or call: 01689 823491.**

**'When a Christian goes to prison – and often to torture or death – the suffering only begins. The family suffers endlessly. We can and must help them.'**



Richard Wurmbbrand, who inspired the founding of Release in 1968, was himself a prisoner for 14 years in communist Romania. He was very much aware that the families of prisoners suffer unbearable anguish, discrimination and continued persecution – and need your continuing prayers and support.

Your gift can make a vital difference by providing practical help and pastoral care to both prisoners and their families.

Please give using the attached card, at [releaseinternational.org/give](http://releaseinternational.org/give) or call: 01689 823491.





# CHRIST IS SUFFICIENT EVEN INSIDE NORTH KOREA

*The promise that ‘for those who love God all things work together for good’ (Romans 8:28) still works for North Korean Christians, writes Dr Eric Foley of Release partner Voice of the Martyrs Korea.*

*‘That’s the problem with you American and South Korean Christians,’ said the first North Korean Christians believer I ever met. ‘You have so much money and so much freedom that you end up putting your faith in your money and your freedom. We North Korean Christians have only Christ, and we have learned that He is sufficient.’*

In nearly 20 years of partnership with North Korean underground Christians, I have never seen a North Korean underground Christian crying out for freedom. I have never seen a North Korean underground Christian

hanging on the words and actions of politicians and governments as if such words could bring life – or as if such actions could make them free.

In North Korea today there are an estimated 100,000 Christians: 30,000 of whom are in concentration camps as a result of their faith.

North Korean Christians outside the camps are not hiding out, waiting for a regime change so they can resume their Christian lives.

As I and my North Korean Christian co-authors wrote in the book *These*



*Dr Eric Foley*

*are the Generations*, North Korean believers remain joyfully faithful to their calling, finding ways to carry out all the functions of church – even in the face of arguably the worst sustained persecution in human history.

They have only Christ, and they have found that He is sufficient.

# NT



An estimated 30,000 believers are held today in brutal concentration camps in North Korea.

*inside a concentration camp as outside of it?'*

Christ did not die for freedom of religion. Christ died for freedom in Christ, which is something that no government can grant and no government can take away.

If we were to ask, *'Where is the church growing faster: in North Korea or the so-called "free" West?'*, the answer is in North Korea, despite Christian practice being a capital crime.

If we were to ask, *'Where are Christians more joyful: in North Korea or the "free" West?'*, the answer, based on our 18 years of experience with North Korean underground believers, is in North Korea.

North Korean believers are filled with the joy that comes from having only Christ and learning that He is sufficient. It is a joy they retain regardless of which side of the prison bars they find themselves on.

The believers we meet who live in the 'free' world are often sad and worried because they don't seem to have enough money or freedom to accomplish what they feel they want or need to do.

Freedom of religion is like any good gift from the Lord: when it is present, we give thanks to the Lord and use it for the Lord's purpose. But we don't idolise or become dependent upon the gift, so when the Lord withdraws it (because even totalitarian governments are His servants, however unwilling), we give thanks to the Lord and use even the lack of freedom for the Lord's purpose.

As our North Korean Christian brothers and sisters remind us, Romans 8:28 does not require government support, financial resources, or human freedom to work. It requires only Christ – and He has promised to be with us until the end of the age.

But what about the 30,000 North Korean Christians inside the concentration camps? Do they not cry out for freedom and pray to God for our help?

***'Christ did not die for freedom of religion. Christ died for freedom in Christ, which is something that no government can grant and no government can take away.'***

One North Korean Christian was bribed out of a North Korean concentration camp and moved to house arrest in North Korea, using money given by Christians from around the world. When the Christian was told this, she asked: *'Why would they do that? Do they not know that Romans 8:28 works just as well*



## **NORTH KOREA**

**Population:** 25.4 million

**Capital:** Pyongyang

**Government type:**  
Totalitarian dictatorship

**Christian population:**  
100,000 (estimated)



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

## **PRAY FOR NORTH KOREA**

- Pray for protection and strength for all believers – especially those suffering in concentration camps.
- Thank God for the growth of the underground church, despite extreme persecution.
- Praise God that His Word is always fruitful and will always achieve the purpose for which He sent it (Isaiah 55:11).

# CRACKDOWN IN IRAN

*Please pray for imprisoned Christians Ebrahim Firouzi and Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh.*

*In recent years there has been a well-organised crackdown by the Iranian authorities to suppress the growth of house churches in Iran – particularly targeting believers from a Muslim background.*

## **EBRAHIM FIROUZI**

Ebrahim Firouzi (pictured), for example, is a Christian convert who is currently serving a five-year sentence for 'acting against national security'. He is one of approximately 90 Christians currently imprisoned across Iran simply as a result of their faith and their desire to meet, study the Bible and worship together with other Christians.

He had been convicted previously of several charges including propaganda against the Islamic regime, evangelism, contacts with anti-Islamic agents abroad and founding a Christian website. For these charges, he served one year in prison and two years of exile to the remote town of Sarbaz.

*'I can't think only about myself when there are so many believers suffering persecution.'*

During his time in prison, Ebrahim has suffered acute pain in the left side of his chest. The authorities reportedly withheld the necessary medical treatment.

*'Jesus is our example: the Saviour who came among us to be crucified and save us,' he wrote.*

*'We sometimes have to sacrifice our freedom to live in God's love, so I can't think only about myself when there are so many believers suffering persecution. My freedom and getting out of prison cannot be my only purpose.*

*'We think especially about the suffering*



Ebrahim  
Firouzi

*of new believers. If my being in prison stirs the international community to work to prevent such future persecution of new believers, then my choice is to remain in prison.*

*'I ask you to pray for the reopening of the churches in Iran that the government has forcibly closed – let the sound of worship and praise be heard in the buildings again! Pray for me to be a good example before the other prisoners.'*

## **PRAY FOR EBRAHIM**

- **that God will enable him to be a shining example of faith while in prison.**
- **that he would experience God's presence, peace, power and protection.**
- **for physical healing.**



## NASER NAVARD GOL-TAPEH

Muslim-background believer Naser (pictured) was arrested in June 2016 when 30 security agents raided an engagement party at a house in the Andisheh township of Karaj, near Tehran.

Everyone present was detained, including three visiting Azeri Christians from Baku, Azerbaijan. Most of the Christians were released after questioning and collection of their personal information, but Naser and the Azeris were transferred to Evin prison in Tehran. Some sources suggested that Naser was not released as he was older than the other Christians in the group and was perceived as the leader.

The four Christians were held in solitary confinement for two months and subjected to intense interrogation.

They were all charged with 'illegal gathering, collusion and evangelism', and were temporarily released on bail equivalent to approximately £25,500 each. The three Azeris were allowed to leave Iran in November 2016, forfeiting their bail.

At Naser's trial in May 2017 he was charged with 'acting against national security through the formation and establishment of an illegal church organisation in his home' and sentenced to ten years in prison. An appeal against his sentence was unsuccessful.

*'My client has not broken any of the criminal code and is not guilty of his charges,'* said his lawyer, Hossein Ahmadi Niaz. *'Their meetings were strictly focused on their faith and worship and nothing else.'*

Naser is being held in Evin prison and has reportedly been denied medical treatment for a severe gum infection, which has caused him great pain.

## PRAY FOR NASER

- for his release from prison.
- that God will strengthen Naser physically, spiritually and emotionally.
- for physical healing of this painful gum infection and any other sickness.



**Population:** 83 million

**Capital:** Tehran

**Government:** Theocratic republic

**Religion:** Muslim: 98.6%, Other: 0.9%, Christian: 0.5%.

Sources: World Facebook, Operation World.



## PRAY FOR PRISONERS OF FAITH

Courageous Christians such as Ebrahim and Naser need your prayers and support more than ever.



That's why Release produces a quarterly email, giving details of one Christian prisoner of faith, with topical

prayer points and details of how you can write letters to support them.

Ask for our free Prisoners of Faith email alert by using the attached card, at [releaseinternational.org/prisoners](http://releaseinternational.org/prisoners) or call: 01689 823491.

## MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR IRANIAN MARTYRS

**Saturday, October 19, 7.30pm**  
**Westminster Chapel, Buckingham Gate, London SW1E 6BS**



During the past 40 years, eight Christian leaders from the Farsi-speaking churches in Iran

have been martyred for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. These include Haik Hovsepian (pictured), Superintendent of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, who was executed by the security forces in 1994.

The UK-based Iranian Christian Fellowship invites you to remember these martyrs and their vision on October 19 – and to reflect on the message they still bring to the church today.

**For further information email [info@icfonline.co.uk](mailto:info@icfonline.co.uk).**

## VOLUNTEERS



# CALLED TO SERVE



*Volunteer as a Church Representative for Release and you can play a vital role in supporting persecuted Christians, says Release's Director of Engagement, Laura Hayes.*

I often think about Peter and Andrew fishing on the Sea of Galilee on the day their lives changed forever.

They were casting fishing nets – no doubt preparing for a long day hauling in the catch – and then perhaps storing the fish in large clay jars with salt to take to market. Just a normal day.

But on this particular day Jesus of Nazareth was about to call them to be 'fishers of men' (Matthew 4:19).

I think too of what Jesus would have seen in them: concentration, diligence, strength (nets can be very heavy) – all skills that could be radically transformed for the Kingdom of God.

Peter and Andrew didn't hesitate. They instantly gave up their work to follow Jesus. They laid down their nets and took a momentous leap of

faith. At Release we believe that we too have been called into service by God – to be the voice of persecuted Christians.

As part of that calling, we have developed our volunteer programme, with many different roles – through which you too can answer God's calling to serve our persecuted Christian family.

Most of our volunteers serve as Church Representatives. This is a vital responsibility and this year we are calling on all our supporters to consider volunteering in their churches for us.

The role is very flexible and can be tailored to your available time and giftings. Can you help us spread the word and distribute our *Voice* magazine in your church four times a year? Or maybe you are called to set

up a prayer group for the persecuted church? We can resource you.

Are you good at speaking to church groups – or would like help to do so? We have a comprehensive speaker training course to help you.

Or you may be great at holding fundraising gatherings? There are so many ways to show God's love for His persecuted people.

I want to say a huge thank you to all our volunteers around the UK and Ireland who support our persecuted family. Thank you too to all our exhibition volunteers who came forward to help during 2019. May God bless you all abundantly.

### New Volunteer Co-ordinator

Release is delighted to announce that Andrew Wilmshurst has been appointed as the new Volunteer Co-ordinator from September 9. We pray that Andrew will settle in to the Release family and get to meet some of you very soon. **;**

**If you would like to volunteer as a Church Representative please contact us using the attached card, call 01689 823491 or email [volunteer@releaseinternational.org](mailto:volunteer@releaseinternational.org).**



## FLOUR POWER!

**Why not arrange a coffee morning and take part in our new 'flour challenge' baking Basbousa cakes (pictured) and selling them for Release (see [releaseinternational.org/flour](http://releaseinternational.org/flour)).**

# Good News

## David's Cotswold Challenge

*'Always up for a challenge, in spite of having reached the age of 70, I took part in the Cotswold Ultra Challenge walk,' supporter David told us.*

David worked in Nigeria's Benue and Plateau states in the 1970s, and wanted to raise funds for persecuted Christians there. *'In recent years many hundreds of Christians have been killed in these two states, and many thousands have had to flee their homes,'* he said.

*'So in June I walked 30 miles, including 2,500 feet of ascent, along the Cotswold Way. Even though temperatures soared to 30C in the afternoon, I praise the Lord that fortified by refreshments and plenty of fluids, I was able to complete the walk in 11 hours, and raise £500 for Release.'*



**It has been reported in *The Sunday Telegraph* that Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi, who was acquitted of blasphemy last October and who is currently living in Canada, is expected to move with her daughters to an undisclosed country in Europe in the coming months. Speaking of her time in prison, she said: *'Sometimes I was so disappointed and losing courage I used to wonder whether I was coming out of jail or not, what would happen next, whether I would remain here all my life.'***

## Ella continues to 'burn out' for God



At the age of 85, Release supporter Ella decided that she would develop 'age rage' and 'burn out for God'.

So for the third time during the past 10 years she invited her family and friends (including three bishops) to celebrate her birthday at All Saints Church, Tooting Bec, in south London. For her 95th birthday she asked people not to bring presents, but to make a donation to Release and a school in India – raising £470 for Release. Thank you so much, Ella!

# SAVED FROM DEATH

*A former soldier in the Middle East who came to Christ has suffered imprisonment for more than two years – and needs our prayers*

Mohammed was both a lay expert in the Koran and an expert trainer of snipers in the military of his Muslim country. That is, until the Arab Spring swept away his nation's long-established dictator during the wave of revolutions starting in 2011.

Mohammed was already dissatisfied with Islam. He had started watching Coptic Christian satellite programmes from Egypt – and was fascinated by the message of the Cross and its offer of forgiveness.

After a few months he bowed the knee to Jesus, and convinced his immediate and extended family members to do the same. At this time, he knew no other Christians. Noting

from the TV that baptism seemed to be important, he went ahead and baptised himself and all his family. He renamed himself and the others with biblical names.

So Mohammed became Ezra and his wife, Martha. As new believers they prayed to God and their worship and teaching comprised a daily dose of Coptic television.

Ezra suffered from diabetes and had to visit hospital regularly. During one stay he watched a Christian guest worker, Abraham, going from bed to bed, praying for the sick. Ezra was amazed when one of the people was dramatically healed and walked out of the hospital!

*'I've got to know this man who was praying', thought Ezra, and friendship with Abraham soon followed.*

***Jesus visited him in a dream and told him, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.'***

After the Arab Spring passed, an Arab winter fell across this now war-torn country. Word got out that Ezra had left the fold of Islam, and ISIS-related militia took him into custody. However, he soon managed to escape.

Back home, he received lots of visitors but did not venture much outside. The imam from a local mosque frequently visited, trying to convince Ezra to recant his Christian faith – sometimes threatening and sometimes reasoning.

One morning the imam showed up at his door, trembling and looking pale.

He told Ezra that Jesus had visited him in a dream and told him, *'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.'* *'Ezra, you are right!'*, he said.

## Liberation

When the city was partially liberated from ISIS control, Ezra decided to remain in his neighbourhood, which was still controlled by militants.

For nearly 15 months government and ISIS forces battled each night for control of the area. Ezra shared his meagre resources with the dozen or so snipers who held out against the government, together foraging for food in bombed-out homes.

One evening he was standing in the street when an ISIS militant next to him was shot and killed by a government sniper. *'The next bullet came at me, but it literally stopped in mid-air at my chest, and dropped to the ground at my feet! God really protected me.'*

His neighbourhood was finally liberated by government forces at the end of 2017, when Ezra was arrested and taken to prison. At first his interrogators were eager to find out if Ezra was an ISIS agent – but as time went by it became clear to them that he served a different Master to Islam.

In fact some of his wider Muslim family members (not those he led to Christ) even told the authorities not to release him – because in their eyes he was an apostate and deserved to be imprisoned or killed.

Today Ezra remains in a government prison. However, when Christians in the underground church discovered Ezra's plight, they began praying for his release – including setting aside three days of prayer and fasting.

Ezra's converted family have suffered greatly in his absence. His Muslim family attempted to force his eldest daughter, Sophia, who loves the Saviour, to marry a militia soldier. Thankfully the Lord intervened and the family relented.

God also delivered his eldest son from danger as he flirted with the possibility of joining a local militia.



Ezra spent 15 months living in a neighbourhood controlled by ISIS militants. Photo: YouTube.

Today life continues to be very difficult for Ezra's wife, Martha, and her four children – two daughters and two sons – and the family really needs their father back home.

Release has been able to provide food and clothing for them, but their needs are still great.

## Please pray:

- **for protection and provision for Ezra and his family, and that Ezra will be released from prison soon.**
- **for all the secret believers in the Middle East who remain faithful despite times of intense persecution.**

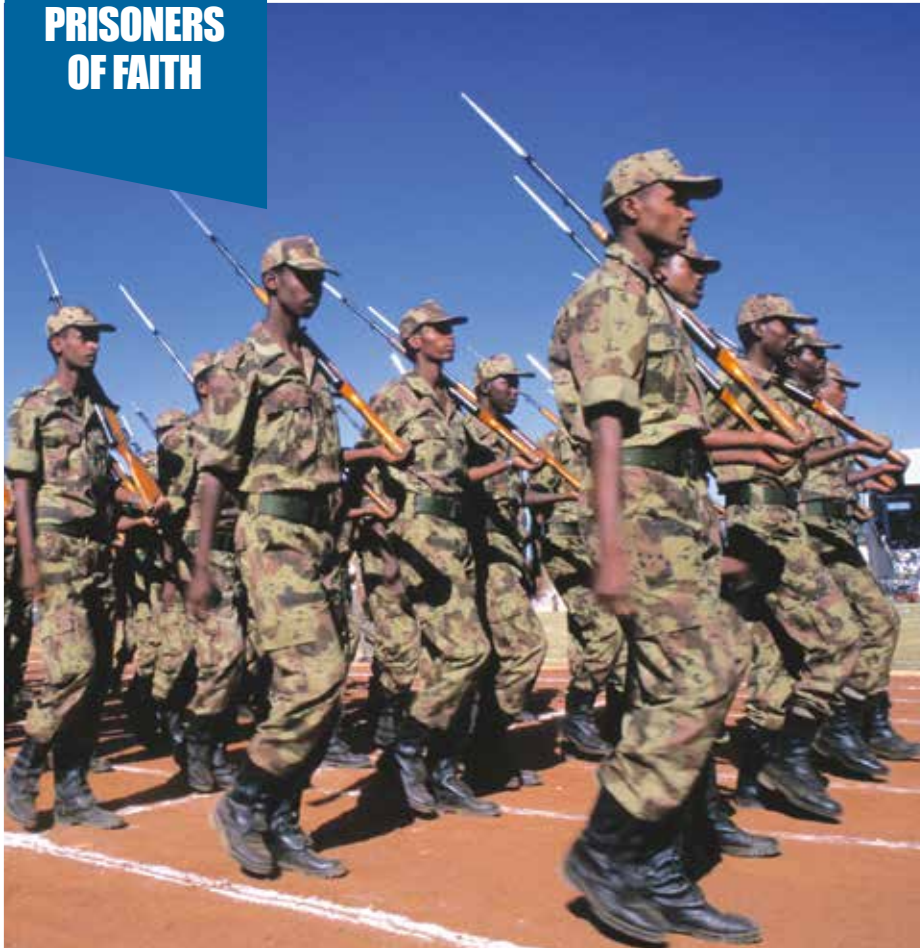


**Your gift can provide a lifeline when the family breadwinner is imprisoned because of their faith in Jesus.**

**Our trusted partners provide food, clothing and medical supplies, and, if possible, help so family members can visit their loved one in prison.**

**If you would like to help the families of prisoners, please use the attached card, give securely online at [releaseinternational.org/give](https://releaseinternational.org/give) or call 01689 823491.**

## PRISONERS OF FAITH



Stock photo.

# PERSECUTION PERSISTS IN ERITREA

*Despite signs of change, Eritrea's authoritarian regime continues to detain Christians at will, reports Release's Tom Hardie.*

When Eritrea signed a peace agreement with its Horn of Africa neighbour Ethiopia last year there was hope that change was afoot, that the country would open up, perhaps freeing its political prisoners and imprisoned church leaders who were seen to pose a threat to the brutal regime of Isaias Afewerki.

That optimism did not last long.

The numbers of Christians in prison have only grown. 'Now there are probably about 400 Christians in

prison,' our partner and Release International trustee, Dr Berhane Asmelash, said.

*'We hoped after the peace deal that the number in prison would decrease – but that has not happened.*

*'Instead the Government has seen the criticism of it coming from the Eritrean diaspora and wants to silence this. Some of those who have left Eritrea have been vocal in revealing what is really going on and that has angered the regime.*

*'What we tend to see are waves of arrests. Christians are picked up and imprisoned and then sometimes released a few weeks later. It's a warning.'*

A much crueller, and longer-term, tactic has been to keep believers in prison for years until they become chronically ill and too weak to criticise the government. 'They are not shot but are left to rot,' said Dr Asmelash.

People like Twen Theodros (pictured), currently enduring her fifteenth year of imprisonment, and Aklilu Desbele, detained for eleven years (see box, facing page).

***'As well as the 400 Christians in prison there could be hundreds more held in military camps – perhaps even as many as 1,000.'***

In order to secure their release, some of the prisoners who had formerly converted from one denomination to another agreed to sign a document stating they would return to their old faith.



Twen Theodros

But the mainly evangelicals or Pentecostals who refused to sign remain incarcerated – preferring prison to renouncing their beliefs.

Dr Asmelash believes that as well as the 400 Christians in prison there could be hundreds more held in military camps – perhaps even as many as 1,000.



As many as 1,000 believers may currently be held in military camps.

'My big prayer is for the health of the prisoners,' he said. 'More than 100 have been locked up for at least seven or eight years. Of these about 40 have been imprisoned for 14 years or more. When they fall sick, they are not taken to hospital.'

Dr Asmelash encourages Christians in the UK to write to their MPs on behalf of Christian prisoners in Eritrea.

The British Government recently accepted the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's report into Christian persecution worldwide (see page 5) so the UK now has a duty to act to protect persecuted Christians, including in Eritrea.

Dr Asmelash fears that the situation in his homeland is not going to improve any time soon.

In January 15 believers were detained in the capital Asmara before being released after two weeks. On May 10, 141 more were arrested in the city; some were later released but one man died in prison. Just a week later a further 30 were taken away in Godaif, south of the capital.

In June a group of 60 from the Methodist church in Keren were taken away and in the days that followed more were detained by the authorities. In August 80 Christians were arrested in Godaif district, Asmara, during a worship service. The believers, who come from different churches, were taken to the police station.

### Please pray that:

- **God would give strength and hope to our persecuted brothers and sisters in Eritrea.**
- **those suffering ill health in prison would be allowed proper medical treatment.**
- **persecution will end and all prisoners of faith will be freed.**

## Pray for Aklilu



Aklilu Desbele is a man of prayer and integrity. He was so committed to the gospel that his friends called him the 'Fifth Gospel'!

He was arrested over 11 years ago and confined to Assab military prison. Recently, we believe he was moved to Mai Serewa prison near the capital Asmara.

Like many others, he could have avoided prison by renouncing his faith – but he chose detention rather than betray his Lord.

His imprisonment has not been widely reported, but he is not forgotten by the Lord whom he loves. Please remember this man of God in your prayers.



### Overcoming faith

Eritrean gospel singer Helen Berhane tells the inspiring story of how she was detained for two years because of her Christian faith and her unwillingness to renounce her beliefs. A remarkable account of triumphant faith.

**Order for £8 (including p&p) using the attached card, at [releaseinternational.org/shop](http://releaseinternational.org/shop) or call 01689 823491.**

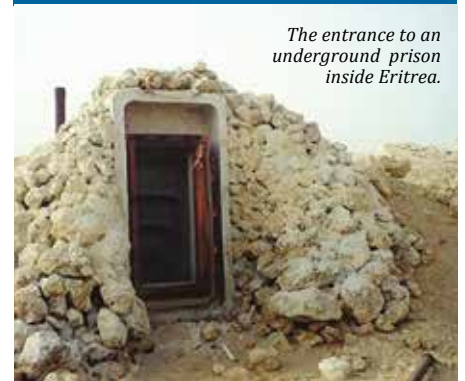
- Read more accounts of the enduring faith of persecuted Christian women in *Embrace*, the newsletter of our Release Women ministry. Request your free copy by calling 01689 823491, or by using the attached card.

### YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO CARE FOR PRISONERS OF FAITH

Your support can provide vital practical help and pastoral care to Christian prisoners and their families around the world.

Your gift can be used to provide food and medical supplies, as well as helping family members to visit their loved ones in prison.

Please give today using the attached card, at [releaseinternational.org/give](http://releaseinternational.org/give) or by calling 01689 823491.



The entrance to an underground prison inside Eritrea.

*The underground cell in Jilava prison, Romania, where Richard Wurmbrand was incarcerated.*

# Wisdom from the prison cell

*Despite enduring solitary confinement and torture in jail in communist Romania for refusing to compromise his Christian faith, Richard Wurmbrand experienced the presence of God in new and powerful ways.*

‘I spent fourteen years in communist prisons – not many by communist standards: the Russian Baptist pastor Hrapov was in jail for twenty-eight years; the Catholic Paulaitis for thirty-five; the Orthodox monk Michael Ershov for over forty. We were hungry, beaten, tortured. For years we were individually isolated in solitary cells, where we heard nothing, not even a whisper.

We had no books or writing materials, much less a Bible. We never saw a child, and seldom a woman. We saw no colours: our world was grey. The walls were grey, our uniforms were grey, even our faces were an ashen grey. We soon forgot that blue, green, red, violet exist.

During those long grey months, those leaden years, what did we think about? Certainly not about communism or about having to suffer. Our minds were too childlike to be controlled by events.

*‘We were free to rejoice in the mysteries of the Word of God’*

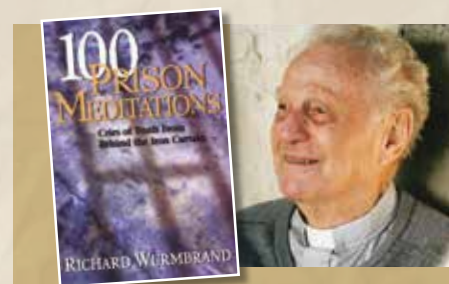
We thought often about things completely unrelated to the pains endured. Will there be many worms in our soup today? Will it contain at least five beans, or perhaps a few more? Will we be allowed to use the toilet? Will I be beaten today? How should I mislead my interrogator so as not to denounce others and cause their arrest? Will I ever be freed? We had problems, but would not allow these to obsess us.

Let them beat, starve, mock us. With such things our torturers busied themselves. We were free to rejoice in the mysteries of the Word of God. With such things we kept busy.

I thought about God and about the Bible, about its words, its letters, even the blank spaces between the letters.

At times I saw these shapes more vividly than the black letters.

Atheists believe they put me in jail. I believe God sent me there, to allow me to delve more deeply into the truths concealed within His words. The outward circumstances, the complete silence, the situation of not being distracted by either sight or sound—all were highly favourable to deep thought. This is when I composed the essence of the meditations presented in this book. ]



Allow the prison meditations of Richard Wurmbrand, who was instrumental in the founding of Release, to strengthen your faith and trust in God.

Order today for £8 (including p&p) by using the attached card, at [releaseinternational.org/shop](http://releaseinternational.org/shop) or call 01689 823491.

Join us to hear

# PETER & HADASSAH HAWK



Don't miss Release partners Peter and Hadassah Hawk from South East Asia who will be sharing their experiences at Release Women's national conference on October 12 (see below and page 23) and at other venues during October.

Peter and Hadassah come from diverse religious backgrounds – one from the Western world, one from the Asian world. Both have suffered in many ways for their belief in Jesus – and their story is a great witness to the power of God.

Their testimonies will encourage you to step out of your comfort zone and trust in God's will and purpose.

## SOUTH OF ENGLAND

<b>Sun, Oct 13</b>	<b>Kingswood Baptist Church</b> 2 Codenham Straight, Basildon SS16 5DH	10:30 am
<b>Mon, Oct 14</b>	<b>Danbury Mission</b> 54 Maldon Road, Danbury, Chelmsford CM3 4QL <i>Refreshments from 7:30 pm</i>	8:00 pm
<b>Wed, Oct 16</b>	<b>Christ Church, Orpington</b> Charterhouse Road, Orpington BR6 9EP <i>Refreshments from 7:30 pm</i>	8:00 pm

*For further details, contact Kenneth on 07375 516408*

## NORTHERN IRELAND

<b>Thurs, Oct 17</b>	<b>Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church</b> 576 Doagh Road, Newtownabbey BT36 5BU	8:00 pm
<b>Fri, Oct 18</b>	<b>Longing to Call Them Family Conference</b> St Elizabeth's, Dundonald BT16 2LP	7:30 pm
<b>Sat, Oct 19</b>	<b>Longing to Call Them Family Conference</b> St Elizabeth's, Dundonald BT16 2LP	10:00 am
<b>Sat, Oct 19</b>	<b>Richhill Elim Church</b> 5 Main Street, Richhill BT61 9PA <i>Peter Hawk only</i>	7:30 pm
<b>Sun, Oct 20</b>	<b>Ballylinney Presbyterian Church</b> 21 Ballylinney Road, Ballyclare BT3 9PB <i>Peter Hawk only</i>	11:30 am
<b>Sun, Oct 20</b>	<b>Glenabbey Church</b> 6 Ballycraigy Road, Glengormley, Newtownabbey BT36 5ZZ	6:00 pm
<b>Mon, Oct 21</b>	<b>St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast</b> Donegall Street, Belfast BT1 2HB	8:00 pm

*For further details, contact Stephen on 07933 313169*

## RELEASE WOMEN NATIONAL CONFERENCE

All supporters are invited to Release Women's national conference, *Rejoice in Hope*, being held at St Michael's Church, Chester Square, in central London on Saturday, October 12. See page 23 for full details.

# release & your church



## Invite a Release speaker to your church

To request a speaker for your church or fellowship group, please contact these numbers:

### Ireland

Stephen on  
028 9334 0014

### London

Imtiaz on  
07597 577041

### Midlands & North

Kenneth on  
07375 516408

### Scotland

James on  
07434 894016

### South

Kenneth on  
07375 516408

### Wales & W Midlands

Paul on  
07747 535588

### Release Women

Laura on  
01689 823491

Or call 01689 823491

## THE WORD

The Apostle Paul reminds us that God can use even persecution to further the gospel, reflects Release's Kenneth Harrod.

# THE UNSTOPPABLE PURPOSE OF GOD

**Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. *But the Word of God is not bound!*** (2 Timothy 2:8-9, ESV, my italics.).

The Apostle Paul's words to Pastor Timothy – in what was probably his final letter – express an inspiring faith in the sovereign, unstoppable purposes of God.

The imprisonment of a Christian – for no other reason than the fact that he is a Christian – is a conscious attempt to stifle the gospel. To silence the preacher. To halt the progress of God's kingdom. That is the work of the evil one.

And so, when we hear stories of pastors or evangelists being imprisoned for their faith, we naturally pray for their release (as did New Testament believers: see, for example, Acts 12:5 and Philippians 1:19). We naturally pray God's grace and comfort to be upon their family; and we may give to provide legal and other aid. All of that is good and to be encouraged – expressing as it does the love and commitment that should be evident within the Body of Christ (1 John 3:17).

But, in and through all of this, we need, first and foremost, to hold fast to our faith in the sovereignty of God and of His purposes.

The Apostle Paul was familiar with persecution generally – and with imprisonment particularly. And yet, despite the suffering – and frustration – that repeated imprisonment

brought, Paul remained firm in the conviction that God is sovereign: *the Word of God is not bound!*

Not only does such imprisonment fail to thwart the gospel, but we can also see how God can use even the imprisonment of His servants to *further* the gospel.

During an earlier confinement Paul writes to the Philippians: 'I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ' (Philippians 1:12-13).

In our own day we have testimonies

from faithful Christians of how the Lord has used situations like this to take the gospel to people who, otherwise, may not have heard it. We may think of Richard Wurmbbrand, whose suffering inspired the founding of Release, or the more recent experience of Release associate Petr Jasek who was imprisoned in Sudan.

The Apostle Paul's grip on the absolute sovereignty of God is to us both challenging and inspiring.

For this reason he can write: 'Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory' (2 Tim.1:10).

## INSPIRING FAITH



*'It becomes clear as we study the New Testament that persecution is not, nor ever will be, foreign to the church on this earth. Therefore, we have an obligation as members of that Body to 'encourage one another and build each other up' (1 Thessalonians 5:11) until Christ returns. To do otherwise would be to reject our Christian responsibility and the teachings of Jesus.'*

Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968 he inspired the founding of Release, which today continues his ministry to serve persecuted Christians around the world in the name of Jesus.

# REJOICE IN HOPE

*Testimonies of serving persecuted  
Christians in South East Asia*

Release Women invites you to its national conference with guest speakers Hadassah and Peter Hawk, partners from South East Asia.

**Saturday, October 12, 2019**

10.00am – 4.00pm

St. Michael's Church, Chester Square,  
LONDON SW1W 9EF

Admission £10. All welcome. Doors open at 9.30am for coffee. Bring a packed lunch.

Order your ticket today by calling 01689 823491, book online at [eventbrite.com](http://eventbrite.com) or pay on the door.

Download a flyer from [releaseinternational.org/rejoice](http://releaseinternational.org/rejoice).



## THE DAY OF THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR

**June 29, 2020**

Release invites you and your church to join us next year in remembering modern-day Christian martyrs on June 29, 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Use the attached card to find out more.



☎ 01689 823491 🌐 [releaseinternational.org/martyrs](http://releaseinternational.org/martyrs)

✉ [martyrsday@releaseinternational.org](mailto:martyrsday@releaseinternational.org)

🐦 #IWillNotAbandonThem

<sup>1</sup> Or any day of your choice.

# *Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?*



A legacy gift to Release International can be a natural continuation of your commitment to share God's love and compassion with persecuted Christians around the world.

For 50 years, your generous gifts have enabled Christians to stand strong in their faith in the face of persecution. With your support, Release's partners are providing prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in over 25 countries.

By including a gift to Release International in your will you can enable that support to continue.



To request a free legacy brochure please call us on 01689 823491, email [info@releaseinternational.org](mailto:info@releaseinternational.org) or use the attached card.

**#IWillNotAbandonThem**

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians

# prayershield

October–December 2019

*Iranian Christians with a Muslim background enjoy a church service conducted in Farsi in Turkey.*



## OCTOBER 2019

*Heavenly Father,*

*Thank You, Lord, that my name is written on the palm of Your hand (Isaiah 49:16). You will never forget or forsake me.*

*Lord, please remind my brothers and sisters who are persecuted today for Your name's sake that they are at the forefront of Your thoughts (Psalm 139:17). Reassure those who are isolated and afraid, especially those behind bars, that You are with them. Overwhelm them with Your love.*

*In Jesus' name.*

*Amen*

## IRAN

**TUESDAY 1:** Please pray for all Christians in Iran who are imprisoned for their faith. They include Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh, serving a ten-year sentence for involvement with an 'illegal church network'.

**WEDNESDAY 2:** Pray that Mahrokh Kanbari will succeed in her appeal against a one-year sentence for 'propaganda against the system' for her church activities. She was also ordered to take 'religious instruction' and return to Islam.

**THURSDAY 3:** Thank God that Seveda Aghasar, an ethnic Armenian, was conditionally released from prison in July. He was originally arrested in 2013, along with Ebrahim Firouzi.

**FRIDAY 4:** Ebrahim (previous prayer) is serving seven years in jail and so will not officially be released until 2020. But pray for his early release: his health is poor.

**SATURDAY 5:** Thank God that the cross has been restored on Tabriz Evangelical Church, after an international outcry about its removal and the closure of this historic church in May. Pray its congregation will now be allowed to worship freely.

**SUNDAY 6:** The ethnic Assyrian Tabriz Church (above) is

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
  
**Voice**  
of Persecuted Christians

allowed to conduct services only in Aramaic, not Farsi. Iranians who convert to Christianity tend to speak Farsi and generally only hear services in Farsi abroad (see picture overleaf). Thank God that His Word transcends all language barriers.

**MONDAY 7:** Pray in faith that Christians in every city in Iran will be free to practise their religion, regardless of their ethnic background or language.

**TUESDAY 8:** Pray that the Iranian regime will start to heed and act upon national and international calls for the protection of religious minorities.

**WEDNESDAY 9:** Please pray for seven Christian converts who were arrested in Bushehr, south-west Iran, in July and held in solitary confinement. Five are from the same family.

## CHINA

**THURSDAY 10:** Pray for Chinese pastor and aid worker John Cao, who has set up many schools in Myanmar. He was detained in 2017, after crossing the border back into China. His seven-year sentence was recently upheld.

*Please send a card of encouragement to Pastor John Cao in prison via Release.*

**FRIDAY 11:** Pray for Pastor Shaojie Zhang, serving a 12-year prison sentence for

allegedly disrupting public order and fraud. His church, Nanle County Christian Church, had been locked in a land dispute with officials and Pastor Zhang is a fierce defender of human rights.

**SATURDAY 12:** Pray for Christians in Xiamen, Fujian province, where authorities closed down more than 40 unregistered churches in June.

**SUNDAY 13:** Officials in Xiamen have said they intend to shut down all house churches over the next two years, as part of a nationwide crackdown. Pray this will only reignite fresh passion for the gospel.

**MONDAY 14:** Pray for an unnamed Christian in Zhengzhou, Henan province, who was beaten by more than ten people when he tried in vain to stop officials from forcibly demolishing a house church. His hand was badly injured.

**TUESDAY 15:** Please continue to pray for members of Early Rain Covenant Church who face intense persecution. Officials have forced church members to make false accusations against Pastor Wang Yi; those who refused to comply were reportedly shackled for days.

**WEDNESDAY 16:** Pastor Wang Yi (above) and four other leaders have been detained since December. Pray they will all be allowed a full legal defence. More charges have been brought against Pastor Wang recently.

**THURSDAY 17:** Ask God to grant His peace to Zhang Xinyue,

wife of imprisoned Early Rain Covenant Church elder Li Yingqiang, who has been visited more than 20 times by officials pressuring her to stop home-schooling her daughter.

**FRIDAY 18:** Pray for officials at the Chinese Embassy in London who received Release's petition this summer. It called on President Xi Jinping to repeal the 2018 religious ordinance which has prompted growing repression against Christians.

## CENTRAL ASIA

**SATURDAY 19:** Pray for Tajik pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov who is serving a three-year sentence after secret police found 'extremist' literature during a raid on the Good News of Grace Protestant Church in Khujand. All religious literature undergoes state censorship.

**SUNDAY 20:** Ask God to encourage Pastor Hamid Shabanov (pictured), leader of a church in Aliabad,



*Pastor Hamid Shabanov has endured years of persecution in Azerbaijan.*

Azerbaijan, who has been arrested and fined many times for hosting religious meetings, despite attempts to register his church.

**MONDAY 21:** Pray for wisdom for Azeri Christians Safqan and Gulnar Mammadov, each facing stiff fines for having religious literature and hosting a children's meeting. The Shirvan Appeal Court recently rejected their appeal.

**TUESDAY 22:** Pray for three Christians from Sheki, northern Azerbaijan, who were fined for holding a home Bible study. Pray that this experience will only deepen their love for the Word of God.

**WEDNESDAY 23:** Administrative prosecutions limiting religious freedom – which have ranged from fines to meeting bans – have risen sharply this year in Kazakhstan. Pray that many inside Kazakhstan will find freedom in Christ.

**THURSDAY 24:** Three Baptist churches in Taraz, Kazakhstan, have been raided by anti-terrorism officers and their leaders fined. Pray for wisdom for these leaders: many Kazakh Baptists have refused to pay fines on principle.

**FRIDAY 25:** Pray for the New Life Pentecostal Church in Almaty, Kazakhstan, which faces which faces charges of large-scale fraud. Police reports claim they found a weapon and ammunition on the premises – claims the church strongly denies.

## ERITREA

**SATURDAY 26:** Continue to pray for the many prisoners of faith held in Eritrea. Many are arrested arbitrarily and held in inhumane conditions, including shipping containers in the desert.

**SUNDAY 27:** Pray for the release of several Christians arrested during a raid on the Faith Missions Church in Keren city in June. Five church leaders were arrested the next day – in apparent retaliation for church leaders' recent calls for peace and reconciliation.

**MONDAY 28:** Pray for Mussie Eyob, detained since February 2011. He had been arrested in Saudi Arabia for preaching to Muslims; he was deported back to his native Eritrea where he is believed to be in Me'etr Prison.

**TUESDAY 29:** Fellow inmates of Mussie (above) are thought to include Twen Theodros, detained since 2005 when she was a new believer. Ask God to strengthen her.

**WEDNESDAY 30:** Mussie Ezaz, a youth pastor, was first arrested in 2007; he escaped but was rearrested and is believed to be being held indefinitely as he has never been tried. Pray he will be reunited with his family.

**THURSDAY 31:** Please pray for Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, the chairman of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance, imprisoned since May 2004 – and never charged. His wife and four adult children have not been able to visit him.

## NOVEMBER 2019

## NORTH KOREA

**FRIDAY 1:** Continue to pray for the countless Christians behind bars in the 'hermit kingdom'. Those who subscribe to any belief system other than *juche* ('self-reliance') suffer severe punishment.

**SATURDAY 2:** Continue to pray in faith that North Korea will once again become a country where people can worship in freedom and truth.

**SUNDAY 3:** Rhee Soon-ja, 82, suffered intense persecution inside her native North Korea and her brother died in a labour camp. Praise God that today she ministers to North Korean defectors.

**MONDAY 4:** Pray that workers like Soon-ja (above) will be led to North Koreans whose hearts are ready to receive the Word.

**TUESDAY 5:** South Korean pastor Kim Kuk-gi is serving a life sentence in a labour camp inside North Korea, for supporting North Korean defectors in China.

**WEDNESDAY 6:** Pray for three other South Koreans detained in North Korea: Choe Chun-gil, who is serving a life sentence; and missionaries Kim Jung-wook and Joo Won-moon.

## ALGERIA

**THURSDAY 7:** A church and its Bible school in Boudjima were closed in May, despite the fact that its pastor, Youcef Ourahmane, says the church has applied for a permit. Pray

that this congregation will continue to enjoy strong fellowship.

**FRIDAY 8:** Pastor Youcef (above) is Vice-President of the Protestant Church of Algeria, an organisation of 45 churches. Several others have been ordered to close like his. Ask God to grant these church leaders wisdom.

**SATURDAY 9:** Pray that Algeria's Christians will be a powerful witness to God's love and grace, especially to those officials who are obeying orders and shutting churches down.

**SUNDAY 10:** Rachid is a Christian with a Muslim background whose Muslim wife charged him with inciting her to change her religion. Thank God that he has had his acquittal upheld. His wife ended their ten-year marriage in March.

**MONDAY 11:** Christian convert 'Ahmed' was charged with 'undermining Islam' after his wife filed a complaint against him – but he was later acquitted. Pray that 'Ahmed', whose wife has now divorced him under pressure from relatives, will be allowed access to his daughters.

**TUESDAY 12:** Pray for a landowner in Azaghar who has been charged with allowing unauthorised worship on his land. A church whose building was sealed in 2018 has been meeting in a tent there.

**WEDNESDAY 13:** The leader of the Church in Makouda, in Tizi Ouzou province – the

second-largest Protestant congregation in Algeria – has been warned he faces charges for building violations. Pray that these threats will come to nothing.

## INDIA

### **'IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION, THE CHURCH IS GROWING AS NEVER BEFORE!'**

*Kumar Swamy, National General Secretary of the All-India Christian Council*

**THURSDAY 14:** Praise God for the growth of His church in India, despite intense persecution. Thank God especially that many Dalits (branded the 'Untouchables') are responding to His message that all men are equal.

**FRIDAY 15:** Pray against Hindu nationalist BJP moves to implement anti-conversion

laws in yet more Indian states: seven states have already introduced such laws, frequently misused to persecute religious minorities.

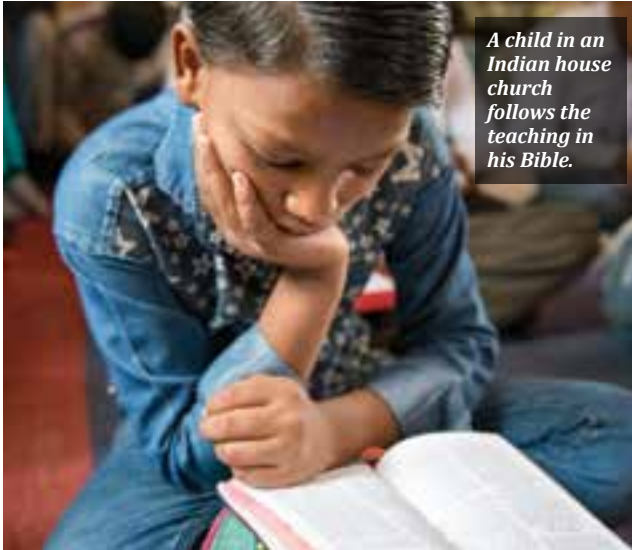
**SATURDAY 16:** Christians in Mahuatoli village, Jharkhand, were forced to participate in a 'reconversion' ceremony in June. Ask God to bless and provide for them: most of the 12 Christian families in the village have now fled.

**SUNDAY 17:** On this, the International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church (IDOP), please pray for all those who are detained for following Jesus. Lift them up to Jesus, their advocate in heaven, and pray for their release.

**MONDAY 18:** Pray for Christians in Chhattisgarh state who are going hungry as members of tribal religions in several villages refuse to sell them food and deprive them of work. In Bodiguda,



Many Christians in India, like these in the north of the country, have a Hindu background, making them a target for reconversion.



*A child in an Indian house church follows the teaching in his Bible.*

Sukma district, locals also attacked Christians' houses and destroyed their food.

**TUESDAY 19:** Christians in Charama village of Kanker district, Chhattisgarh, who are banned from buying food locally due to their faith, have brought a court case against their opponents. Pray that the case will succeed and end this ostracism.

**WEDNESDAY 20:** Pray for believers in Dargahan village, Dhamtari district, Chhattisgarh, whose leaders have told them they are not allowed to work, use public transport or talk to non-Christians. They are not even allowed to farm their own land.

**THURSDAY 21:** Please pray that Christians across India will grow in spiritual maturity and discernment so they can withstand persecution and harassment.

**FRIDAY 22:** Pray for three Christian families in Darashiv village of Champa district, Chhattisgarh, who gave in to pressure and renounced Christ. Pray that they will return to their Saviour and know His forgiveness, comfort and grace.

**SATURDAY 23:** Thank God for the overcoming faith of women such as Yashoda Ratre in Chhattisgarh, despite intense pressures and death threats. 'We will not leave Christ,' she says. Christians have also been denied government aid after flooding.

**SUNDAY 24:** Ask God to grant His wisdom and protection to Christian families in Pondum village, Dantewada district, Chhattisgarh, who have been told to leave the village or face death.

## PHILIPPINES

**MONDAY 25:** Christians say there has been an increase in violent attacks on religious rights campaigners since President Rodrigo Duterte took office in 2016. Bishops recently referred to this as 'one of the most trying periods in our history'. Ask God to strengthen His people in the Philippines.

**TUESDAY 26:** Please pray for the family of Pastor Ernesto Javier Estrella who was shot dead in Cotabato Province in Mindanao in August. His wife suspects his murder was politically motivated.

**WEDNESDAY 27:** Some Christians have been accused of libel and sedition, as part of the government response to criticism of its war on drugs. Pray that the Government will start to see the church as a force for social good.

**THURSDAY 28:** Pray for Christians in Mindanao who are concerned religious liberties will be further eroded after the recent institution of an Islamic sub-government in the newly created Bangsamoro Autonomous Region.

**FRIDAY 29:** Mindanao has been under martial law since 2017 after an Islamic State insurgency. Pray that the church in Mindanao will shine like a beacon of hope.

**SATURDAY 30:** Pray that God's Word will spread across the Philippines and many other countries where Christians face Islamist extremists.

## DECEMBER 2019

### INDONESIA

**SUNDAY 1:** Pray for our church family in Indonesia who are experiencing what many see as a rising tide of persecution.

**MONDAY 2:** Pray for the Family of God Church in West Jakarta which received its official permit in July but has not yet opened due to threats from the Islamic Defenders Front. The same extremist group drove the congregation out of their last building in the city.

**TUESDAY 3:** In Central Java, a Pentecostal church in Yogyakarta city is facing calls to close just months after it opened. Pray for patience and justice for Pastor Tigor and his congregation who had a two-year wait for the church permit to be granted.

**WEDNESDAY 4:** Praise God that Pastor Tigor (above) and his church have an ally in the local police chief who has warned local objectors: 'I will protect the repressed minority with my blood.' Pray that God will raise up many more defenders of religious freedom.

**THURSDAY 5:** Pray that many of those who currently oppose Christian worship in Indonesia will come to Christ.

**FRIDAY 6:** Hard-line Muslims are reportedly training young men to seduce and

impregnate Christian girls, often forcibly. Due to cultural pressures, the girls are then forced to marry into a Muslim family. Pray for protection and justice for these girls.

### PAKISTAN

**SATURDAY 7:** Ask God to encourage Zafar Bhatti who is serving a life sentence after 'blasphemous' messages attributed to him were found on a phone not even registered to his name. His appeal has been adjourned repeatedly.

**SUNDAY 8:** Please pray for the family of Javed Masih in Punjab who was brutally killed by his boss for daring as a 'lowly Christian' to work for someone else. Javed sought work elsewhere after his boss refused him a loan to pay for his disabled son's medical treatment.

**MONDAY 9:** Javed's alleged killer (above) has threatened his family with violence if they press charges. 'They know we are weak and cannot fight them,' a relative said. Pray that Javed's family will have justice and ask God to provide for them.

**TUESDAY 10:** Please continue to pray for Christians charged with 'blasphemy' – including those like Asia Bibi and Pervaiz Masih, who have been acquitted. Their lives remain at risk from extremists, even though Asia is no longer in Pakistan. Pervaiz remains in Punjab.

**WEDNESDAY 11:** Thank God that Pastor Aziz and his family escaped with only minor injuries after a mob of more than 30 men tried to attack them in Balochistan province. A passing police officer rescued the family. Pray that God will provide a new home for the family as the mob seized their house.

**THURSDAY 12:** More than 15 years ago, Muslim relatives kidnapped the five-year-old son of Pastor Aziz (above): he has not been seen since. Pray that God will watch over Aziz's son and reunite him with his parents.

### NIGERIA

**FRIDAY 13:** Stand with us in interceding for our brothers and sisters in north and central Nigeria, many of whom face intense persecution and live in constant fear of violent attack. Pray that Nigeria will become a model of inter-religious harmony.

**SATURDAY 14:** Pray for the families of the 13 people killed when militants raided several mainly Christian villages in the area bordering Plateau and Kaduna states earlier this year. Hundreds were left homeless.

**SUNDAY 15:** June marked the first anniversary of co-ordinated attacks on 15 communities in Plateau state in which 233 people died. As yet no arrests have been made. Pray that officials

will harden their resolve to identify and arrest the culprits.

**MONDAY 16:** Fulani herdsmen killed Margaret Wakili in Ancha village, Plateau, as she brought food to her husband who was working in a field. Pray that the Fulani will renounce violence and their suspected links with Islamist extremists *Boko Haram*.

**TUESDAY 17:** Ask God to comfort the family of Thomas Wollo and his seven-year-old son, Nggwe, who were brutally killed by militants on their way back from choir practice in Tafigana, Plateau.

**WEDNESDAY 18:** Please pray that *Boko Haram* extremists will grow weary of bloodshed. Pray specifically they will release all those they have abducted, including the remaining Chibok girls and Leah Sharibu, a teenager kidnapped in Dapchi who has refused to deny her faith in order to secure her freedom.

**THURSDAY 19:** Please pray for wisdom, courage and steadfastness for the Nigerian Government and military so they will bring an end to the violence and persecution.

## SRI LANKA

**FRIDAY 20:** Please continue to pray for all those affected by the Easter Sunday bombings of churches and hotels in

Colombo and Batticaloa: the bereaved and those who are coming to terms with life-changing injuries.

**SATURDAY 21:** About 50 protesters, including a dozen Buddhist monks, recently demonstrated outside a church in Divulapitiya, demanding an end to worship services. When the pastor called the police, officers joined in with the protesters' threats. Ask God to protect this congregation.

**SUNDAY 22:** Pray for members of the Christian Family Church in Galgamuwa which was recently raided by a large mob. The crowd, making death threats, demanded the service stop immediately.

**MONDAY 23:** Pray that Christians in Sri Lanka will continue reaching out with the message of God's love to those around them, despite the risk of violence. Pray that Sri Lanka's political leaders will be fierce defenders of religious freedoms for all.

## Prayers for Christmas

**CHRISTMAS EVE:** Please stand with us in asking God to strengthen our Christian family in Sri Lanka – and across the world. Please ask for divine protection over their church services and festivities this week, and pray that they will not be cowed by fear of attack.

**CHRISTMAS DAY:** As we celebrate the incomparable gift of Jesus and God's unconditional love, let's pray that our persecuted family worldwide will experience His joy, His peace and His presence today.

**BOXING DAY:** Let's remember those who are in prison or denied contact with their loved ones as punishment for following Christ. Pray that they will have opportunities to share the gospel with others and pray their release will come soon.

## SYRIA

**'I should love even my enemies who kidnapped me. God can judge them; I will love them.'**

*Abdu, captured by Syrian Islamists*

**FRIDAY 27:** Islamic Front insurgents kidnapped Abdu (pictured overleaf) in Syria in 2014 – then miraculously set him free. His family lost everything when Islamic State built a mosque on their land. Thank God that Abdu, who now lives abroad, has become a committed Christian.



Abdu found true faith in Christ after being kidnapped by Islamists in Syria.

**SATURDAY 28:** Pray for the 11 people injured when a car bomb exploded outside the Syriac Orthodox Church in Qamishli city, during a prayer meeting in July.

**SUNDAY 29:** Thank God that the terrorists' apparent plan to murder members of the Syriac Orthodox Church congregation (previous prayer) as they emerged

Sources: BBC; China Aid; Forum 18; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Release partners and contacts; *The Jakarta Post*; UCA News; Voice of America; VOM Canada; VOM USA.

Names in inverted commas have been changed to protect identities. While we do not provide financial support to every Christian mentioned in *Prayer Shield*, we believe in the power of prayer to change lives.

from the prayer meeting was thwarted. The bomb was apparently detonated too early.

**MONDAY 30:** Ask God to speak to the hearts of extremists and pray that they will come to know forgiveness and new life in Christ.

**TUESDAY 31:** On the eve of a new year, pray that God will rebuild His church in Syria, adding to those who have chosen to stay despite the atrocities of recent years. Pray that He will renew in them 'a steadfast spirit', for His glory (Psalm 51:10).

*Lord Jesus,*

*Thank You that You have walked every difficult path that has ever faced me. You have known rejection, hard choices and heartbreak.*

*Jesus, as we share in Your sufferings, You share in ours. Thank You for walking in step with our persecuted family.*

*Lord, give them boldness to share Your life-giving Word with those who persecute them out of ignorance and fear. May they speak out Your beautiful name, Jesus, and draw strength from it.*

*Amen*