

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JUL-SEPT 2024

# voice

of Persecuted Christians

## HELPING PRISONERS OF FAITH

Families who  
pay the price  
*Daily struggle of  
wives in Pakistan*

Completing  
the sentence  
*Christian's poetry  
behind bars*

New Release  
International  
book  
*The story of Eritrea's  
unlikely revolutionary*

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



# Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

Remember  
Christian  
prisoners

**As spring gives way to summer and many of us head off on our holidays, either here in the UK or abroad, it can be easy to forget those of our brothers and sisters who do not have the option of escaping their four walls even for a day, simply because of their stand for Christ.**

In this edition of *Voice* we focus on the prisoners of faith and their loved ones, who in some cases have endured years apart; prisoners such as Zafar Bhatti in Pakistan and his wife Nawab, the group of prisoners in Eritrea who have spent significant parts of their lives behind bars; and Chinese church leaders who are paying the price for preaching the gospel (see pages 6-15 and the Word on page 22).

However, it would be easy to focus on the deprivations they have all suffered and continue to endure – and we must pray for them and support them where we can – but that is by no means the whole story, as you will read in these pages.

While the authorities lock up our brothers and sisters in an effort to stop the spread of the gospel and crush the church, we hear that the opposite is happening: other prisoners are coming to faith as they see the witness of faithful followers of Christ and the church 'outside' is emboldened to persevere and not be cowed as it sees its members being willing to suffer even lengthy prison terms.

So let us learn from and be inspired by them

but, as we enjoy the freedom of our holidays, let's also not forget their confinement; as we perhaps take comfort from good food and drink let us remember their lack of nourishment and their poor health; as we enjoy the warmth of the sunshine let us remember those in cells who may not have seen daylight for days yet suffer an intense heat they cannot escape; and as we celebrate with loved ones let us pray for those who have not seen their wives or husbands or children for many years. They are our family.

## ON THE ROAD

One of the ways we share the message of persecution with the UK church is by attending Christian festivals and other events. If you're at one of these exhibitions or conferences this summer please do come and say hello at our stand. We'd love to see you in person. See page 21 for the events we will be attending.

## DRAMATIC SUCCESS

When we teamed up with the Artless Theatre Company to produce *If Prison Walls Could Speak* back in 2021 we never dreamed how successful it was going to become. Three years on, more and more dates are planned for this powerful drama (see page 20). If you haven't had a chance to watch it, I would encourage you to set aside an evening to go along, and even to take non-Christian friends with you. Who knows how God might speak to you – and them.

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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)

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# Faith under fire

## Pakistani Christian succumbs to injuries

A 74-year-old Pakistani Christian, Nazeer Masih Gill, died in the Combined Military Hospital Rawalpindi in Punjab province on June 3, just over a week after he was violently attacked by a mob following an accusation of blasphemy.

On May 25 a message was broadcast over mosque loudspeakers in the Mujahid colony of Sargodha district accusing Nazeer of burning pages of the Koran, prompting a mob of more than 1,000 people to attack his home and the shoe factory he had owned in the area for six years.

The mob threw stones and bricks at Nazeer and beat him with steel rods before he was rescued by police. He was placed in a critical condition ward at the hospital due to his multiple head injuries and on June 2 was put on a ventilator. He died in the early hours of June 3 due to multiple organ failure and was swiftly buried in his hometown of Sargodha, where police have assured his family of protection.

A tense calm prevailed in Sargodha on the Sunday following the attack, with police arresting 26 Muslims in a case registered against 44 named suspects and 300 to 400 unidentified rioters, sources said.

(Sources: Christian Daily International-Morning Star News; CSW)



Believers pray in Hong Kong, where a new law could force priests to disclose the secrets of the confessional

## Protecting confessional could cost clergy 14 years in jail

A new law introduced by Beijing could force priests in Hong Kong to reveal the secrets of the confessional or risk a jail sentence of 14 years.

Thirty-five years after tanks and troops moved into Tiananmen Square, the persecution of Chinese Christians, which is the worst it has been since the Cultural Revolution, is spreading to the former British territory.

Release International partners said the UK Government had a responsibility to stand up for freedom of faith there.

June 4 was 35 years to the day that China crushed the Tiananmen Square protests. Following the destruction of the democracy movement, China has progressively stepped up the persecution of Christians in the country.

The latest report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) gave warning that China's crackdown on Christians was tightening. That persecution has extended to Hong Kong and beyond China's national borders.

Our partner said that, while persecution remains less severe than on the mainland, religious freedom in Hong Kong was under growing threat.

Protestant pastor Garry Pang Moon-yuen was the first Hong Kong clergyman to be convicted under the recent National Security Law. He was jailed in 2022 after being accused of preaching sedition.

Now legislation passed in March this year could force Catholic priests to reveal the secrets of the confessional. Under Article 23, they could face a 14-year prison sentence if they refuse to reveal so-called crimes of treason shared during confession.

## Kazakh worship services raided

Police in Shu District of southern Kazakhstan raided four worship meetings of three unregistered Protestant communities and issued six summary fines in March and April. A local court handed down another fine. The leader of one church, 77-year-old Pastor Andrei Boiprav, awaits a court hearing, despite his health condition. Church members say the situation is causing 'a threat to his life and health'.

The three churches subjected to police raids are all unregistered with the state. Two are of the Baptist Council of Churches, who choose not to seek state registration. Exercising freedom of religion or belief without state registration is illegal and punishable.

'What has been happening in the last month in Shu has aroused serious concern among evangelical communities, which have experienced persecution for their religious activity,' local Council of Churches Baptists noted in April. The Baptists' activity 'is not illegal or extremist', church members insisted.

(Source: Forum 18)

## Listen to our latest podcasts



**COURAGE TO BE A LIGHT** For a number of years now Release International has supported persecuted Christians who have fled to the safer haven of the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq. In this edition of Release International's *Voice* podcast we speak to Ano Jawhar, a Christian politician in Kurdistan, who talks to us about past persecution, the present nature of the region – and the dangerous mindset of militant groups such as Islamic State.

**WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY?** 'We still have windows of opportunity [and] it is our obligation before the Lord to pray for them and support them.' In many parts of our world today Christians continue to pay a high price for following Jesus Christ. In this edition we speak to Pavel, our partner for countries in Central Asia. Listen in as we talk about the current situation in Ukraine and how Christians are faring under Russian occupation. And, we talk about Pavel's ongoing work today supporting persecuted Christians in Central Asia.

**WHEN YOUR FAITH BECOMES ILLEGAL** Eritrea is a country where it is extremely difficult to be an evangelical Christian; a country where evangelising – and even praying in meetings – can be dangerous activities. In this podcast we speak to our Eritrean partner, Dr Berhane Asmelash, who explains the background to the situation in that country and what it is like being a Christian there. Dr Asmelash reminds us of the story of Luul and his family, who now live in the UK.

**PERSECUTION TRENDS 2024** Persecution has always been one of the ways the powers of darkness seek to stop the spread of the gospel. That's why it's important that we pray. But to pray with understanding we need to know who to pray for and what to pray for. We need to be informed. In this edition of the *Voice* podcast we speak to Release International's Tom Hardie, who edits our quarterly *Voice* magazine and compiled this year's annual Persecution Trends report.

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# Burkinabe Christians forced to flee

As jihadist violence continues to plague Burkina Faso, Christians are calling for urgent prayer. Many have been displaced by attacks on communities by militants and are living in camps for IDPs (internally displaced people).

On a recent trip to Burkina Faso a Release International team met a number of believers who had been affected by the violence, including one woman whose husband, a pastor, had been killed in his church.

Jihadists are cleansing villages and small towns of people who don't agree with their thinking or with the *Sharia* (Islamic law) they want to impose, forcing more Christians to flee to safer areas.

The military Government, which had promised to restore civilian rule in July 2024, has now extended its control for another five years, the BBC reported.

However, according to the BBC, the regime has been accused by international and human rights groups, including the European Union and UN, of serious human rights violations in its fight against the insurgency, including the indiscriminate killings and forced disappearances of civilians.

• See enclosed Prayer Shield for specific requests relating to believers in Burkina Faso.

(Sources include: BBC and Release International partners)

## Eritrean church leader dies in prison



One of the founding fathers of the Full Gospel Church in Eritrea has died in prison. Reverend Ghirmay Araya (pictured), who was aged 83, was arrested along with other church leaders in 2004. Ghirmay, who suffered from diabetes and related illnesses, was never charged with any crime.

The Eritrean regime banned the Full Gospel Church along with many others in 2002.

Release International partners said thousands of Eritreans had been imprisoned for their faith since that time, some of whom had died from torture and untreated illness.

They added: '*Rev Ghirmay was among these and endured his suffering with steadfast faith.*'

Ghirmay was arrested again in 2021 and held in the maximum-security Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Centre, along with other church leaders. Some had been detained for 20 years.

One of Ghirmay's sons has also been imprisoned for his faith for the past seven years. Sources said he was being kept in a shipping container, a practice long condemned by Release International. Although they were in the same prison, father and son had no opportunity to meet, and the son was not even aware of his father's death.

Our partner, Dr Berhane Asmelash, said: '*I'm deeply saddened by Rev Ghirmay's death, and express my heartfelt condolences to his wife, their children and his extended family.*'

'*Rev Ghirmay served the church diligently for more than 60 years in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. His ministry extended across the Orthodox, Lutheran, and finally Full Gospel churches.*' Ghirmay is survived by five children and 13 grandchildren.

Dr Asmelash expressed concern for the welfare of the hundreds of other Christian prisoners currently in Eritrean jails. '*Many are getting on in age and suffer from various health conditions.*'

Called to be a prisoner, page 14

## Inside story: the price that prisoners' families pay

*Wives of imprisoned Christians in Pakistan can feel just as trapped as their husbands in a daily struggle to survive. Thankfully our partners stand with them, offering spiritual as well as practical support*

**P**akistani Christian Nawab Bibi is able to see her imprisoned husband, Zafar Bhatti, only once a month.

She tries to visit him regularly but she has relocated from Islamabad to Lahore, which is safer for her and where she receives more support but it is much further away from the prison.

Zafar, a pastor, was falsely accused of blasphemy in 2012 and has been behind bars ever since.

Both he and his wife now have significant medical needs: Nawab's poor hearing and eyesight are a daily challenge for her, while her husband struggles with diabetes, which has led to swollen feet, as well as a heart condition and stomach pain.

Arguably most concerning of all, he appears to have lost hope of ever being released.

When Release International visited Nawab with our partner she wept as she reflected on the years they had been apart and the hardships that

had entailed for both of them. She is also deeply discouraged because no one seemed to be pursuing Zafar's case.

At the same time Nawab is under pressure to vacate her home, which is causing her a significant amount of worry. Understandably she wants somewhere that is private but it is not easy to acquire suitable accommodation.

Our partner, Lahore Evangelical Ministries, continues to support her, regularly visiting and providing pastoral and also some financial help.

Zafar was charged with sending blasphemous text messages in July 2012, an allegation he has denied. In May 2017 he was sentenced to life imprisonment even though the mobile



Marilyn and the children had to go into hiding after Asif was given a death sentence



Nawab Bibi has been separated from her husband for 12 years

phone in question was not registered to his name. In December 2021, that punishment was increased to a death sentence.

Before his arrest Zafar worked selling medicines door to door and would often take the opportunity to read the Bible and pray with families in homes he visited. He founded and led a small organisation called Jesus World Mission to help the poor.

In prison Zafar has experienced pressure from other prisoners to convert to Islam and has been beaten several times. In 2013 his food was poisoned and he was left in a critical condition for several days.

During our most recent visit Nawab asked for prayer that Zafar’s case would be handled well by a new

lawyer, that his health would be restored and that he would finally be released.

### PLEASE PRAY

- For God’s protection on Zafar in prison and provision for Nawab
- That justice would prevail
- For God’s help and peace for Nawab and their children
- For Zafar’s precarious health (his heart function is very low) and that Nawab would receive urgent cataract surgery

Find out more about Zafar’s case on the Prisoner Profiles pages of our website, [releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org).

## Hard-pressed on all sides

It takes Marilyn Asif five hours to travel to see her husband, Asif Pervaiz, who is in prison in Faisalabad.

She visits with her children as often as she can but as well as the physical demands of making such a long journey it also costs a lot per trip, which includes buying medicines for Asif and preparing food as well as paying for transport. Because the jail is not easily accessible she has little choice but to hire a private car to reach it.

Like Zafar, Asif was accused under Pakistan’s widely misused blasphemy laws. The case against him was initially brought in 2013; in 2020 he received a death sentence and immediately Marilyn and their children had to go into hiding to protect themselves from militant attacks.

### ‘Life without a husband is very difficult’

Marilyn looks after four children: her oldest son who is 15, another son who is 13 and twins (a boy and a girl) who are 10. They usually see Asif once a month. His parents also visit but, under strict prison rules, no one else is allowed to see him.

Marilyn always takes the children with

her and they are allowed one hour with Asif.

There is a glass screen between them and they can speak only through an intercom one at a time. Sometimes the children compete to be able to speak to their father over the intercom. They are always pleased to see him but understandably leave with a sense of disappointment that they will not be able to be with him again for some time.

Marilyn told us: *‘There is [nothing pleasant] in my life, I am struggling with the children and life without a husband is very difficult.’*

She experiences some opposition from the community and is not happy having to share a house with the owner, who does not allow NGOs (non-government organisations) to visit. The children are constantly being asked questions about their father and his imprisonment, which is distressing for them.

When Asif was handed the death sentence, Marilyn’s in-laws forced her out of the home. She has heard that Asif’s father has developed cancer and would like to see him but she is not sure whether that will be allowed.

For Asif too, life in prison is immensely challenging. He has depression and is on various medications. On top of this he has a fast heartbeat for which he is scheduled for tests as well as eyesight problems for which he needs glasses.

Marilyn holds on to the hope that her husband will be acquitted and asks for prayer that another court hearing would happen soon – the last one was in April 2023. She also asks for God’s help for her and the children.

Thanks to the generosity of Release International supporters, our partners have been able to assist Marilyn financially so she can visit Asif as well as provide for the basic needs of the family.

### PLEASE PRAY

- For an improvement in Asif’s health
- For peace and provision for Marilyn and their children
- For another court hearing that would provide justice for the family

# WHAT YOUR SUPPORT MEANS

**Thanks to your financial help** Release International supports a number of projects to help Christians imprisoned for their faith. These include:

**ERITREA** Support of food packages for prisoners, financial assistance for prisoners' families, accommodation and healthcare for ex-prisoners. Providing those who have fled Eritrea and the Tigray conflict with skills to help them earn a living

**CHINA** Support of workers to ensure that imprisoned believers are not forgotten and receive legal assistance and that the wider Christian community is able to pray for them and speak out on their behalf. Direct support to prisoners' families

**PAKISTAN** Regular pastoral visits to prisoners and their families and tailored support for these families including financial help and assistance with individual situations such as relocating to a safer area

**IRAN** Support of ex-prisoners re-establishing their lives and ministry in new countries. Once someone has been arrested in Iran it is difficult for them to be an effective part of the cell church community because they will be monitored

**LAOS** Support with basic living expenses and medical needs of the former prisoner, Bounchan, following his release from prison in 2012 after 14 years' detention

**GLOBAL PRISONERS** We have provided support to families of prisoners and to released prisoners from a variety of places, including Bhutan, Somalia and North Africa, as they recover from their experience.



*Evin prison in Iran has held many Christians*



## PLEASE HELP CHRISTIAN PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Release International helps Christian prisoners of faith and their families around the world in the name of Jesus.

To support this vital ministry to courageous believers, we depend on the gifts and prayers of Christians in the UK and Ireland.

Your gift could:

- Provide practical help and pastoral care for prisoners and their families
- Enable families to visit their loved ones in prison
- Provide legal and other assistance

To make a gift please use the enclosed form, call 01689 823491 or give online at [releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org)



## Martyr's widow relies on God's grace

**W**hen her husband was killed in a bomb attack in Youhanabad in 2015, Balkees Khushi did not know how she would be able to carry on. In one moment her life had been devastated: not only had she lost her beloved partner but she would now have to bring up their children alone.

On a recent trip to Pakistan we were privileged to meet Balkees, who described to us how life had been for her and her eight children (two boys and six girls) after Khushi Masih's death.

At the time of the attack, the oldest was 20 years old and the youngest just four. The couple had been supporting themselves and the children by running a business selling chickens.

On that day there were about 1,200 people in the church. Most members of the congregation, including Balkees, stayed in the building for

holy communion while Masih and a few others left the church. When the bomber saw people starting to come out, he detonated the explosives and 17 people were killed. It later transpired that he had been visiting the church in previous weeks in order to plan the attack.

When Balkees heard the blast she hurried outside and collapsed in shock because of the terrible things that she saw. Her husband was taken to hospital but sadly he did not survive.

Over subsequent years, Balkees has been extremely upset and has called out to the Lord in her desperation. She had not expected to become a widow, nor for her children to be fatherless and she was unsure how she would survive. However, she has received much support and told us that she has known the Lord's comfort. She praises God and has shown courageous faith, declaring that His word in her heart is her strength.

Needless to say it has been immensely challenging for Balkees to live in a male-dominated society without her husband and to bring up their children on her own. Owing to her son being a Christian he has been unable to obtain a well-paid job and instead has to work in a factory.

She asks that we remember her in our prayers, especially as she seeks to bring up the younger children in a Christian way. She asks that we pray that her sons and daughters are successful in life. There are financial challenges for them as a family but she described her experiences *'like a thorn in her flesh; but His grace is sufficient'*.

### PLEASE PRAY

- That Balkees's spiritual life remains strong and the family remain committed in their Christian faith
- That God provides for the family's needs and the children succeed at school and at work

## Poetic injustice: jailed pastor expresses faith through verse

*Earlier this year Chinese pastor John Cao was released after serving a seven-year sentence – but his freedom of movement is still restricted. He recently spoke about both his time behind bars and his current circumstances*

**‘W**hy have I been put in jail?’ That was the question that nagged at John Cao after he was arrested by Chinese officials in Yunnan province back in March 2017.

Chinese-born John, who had lived with his family for a number of years in the US, had been running schools for needy children in the northern part of Myanmar. *‘People had no food or clothes. Basically they were naked. I brought clothes, food, medicine into this place,’* he said.

He made no attempt to hide the fact

that he was crossing the border from China into Myanmar to resource these schools. After his arrest his family claimed that Chinese officials were aware of his work and even helped him cross the border on occasions.

However, he was arrested and charged with ‘organising illegal border crossings’. The following year he was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment and fined 20,000 yuan (about £2,250). A subsequent appeal was postponed seven times, before the sentence was upheld. *‘We set up schools and actually taught them*

*Chinese – which is also good for the Chinese Government! So I often asked, “What’s wrong? Why put me in jail for seven years?”*

*‘But suddenly I understood. That was the beginning of a movement by the Chinese Communist Party to persecute Chinese Christians – mainly those in the underground house churches. That is really the point. They didn’t just put me in jail; that was the beginning of persecution against the underground house church movement. They have put so many behind bars. That is an antichrist movement.’*

***‘I baptised him with rain water’***

John spent the first two-and-a-half years in a detention centre. Food was sparse and he quickly lost 40 lbs in weight. Then, in 2019, he was transferred to a prison. He found



*John Cao saw several inmates come to Christ during his time in prison*

himself in a cell with ten people sleeping together on a single, large bed! *'The good thing was I was able to share Jesus Christ with the people on my left and on my right! So the hearts of the two guys were opened by the Spirit to believe in Jesus Christ. Both of them accepted him as their Lord.'* Shortly after this, John managed to collect water in a bucket, during heavy rain, and poured it over them to baptise them!

*'Then the officers found out and moved me to another room. So I started over again!'*

Before too long John led two more men to faith in Christ. One was facing a death sentence for drug smuggling. *'Of course he was totally desperate and hopeless but after he accepted Christ he said to me he felt totally relieved,'* said John. *'I baptised him in the same way, with rain water.'*

During the next four years John was severely restricted in terms of letters he could receive from family and friends. When his mother copied a few Bible verses and put them into a letter this was confiscated by the authorities.

*'My mother travelled more than 20 hours by train to visit me. We talked over a phone through a window and the officers listened to our conversation. My mother said Pastor so-and-so is praying for you – and the conversation was then cut off immediately. My mother had travelled all those hours but was only able to talk for three minutes because she had mentioned someone was praying for me. They didn't like the word "prayer".'*

*'I was not allowed to do anything for my faith. I could not pray. At first I was kneeling down to pray every day but then they stopped me. So I started*

*to pray by lying down on my bed as if sleeping, with my face down.'*

John was not allowed a Bible or even other books. So he started composing poems. *'I had never composed a poem before. I had to write in very "unclear" language, or the police wouldn't have allowed me to send them to my mother. It required wisdom. I started to praise my God and to express my thanks to my Lord and how I was understanding my life in prison and how I can live for Jesus Christ.'*

A selection of John's poems were subsequently published by Release International's partner, ChinaAid, as *Living Lyrics: Poems from Prison*. One of them includes the following verse:

***You can take away my freedom,  
but you can't take my prayers.***

***My prayers have wings and leap  
over the towering iron mesh  
wall.***

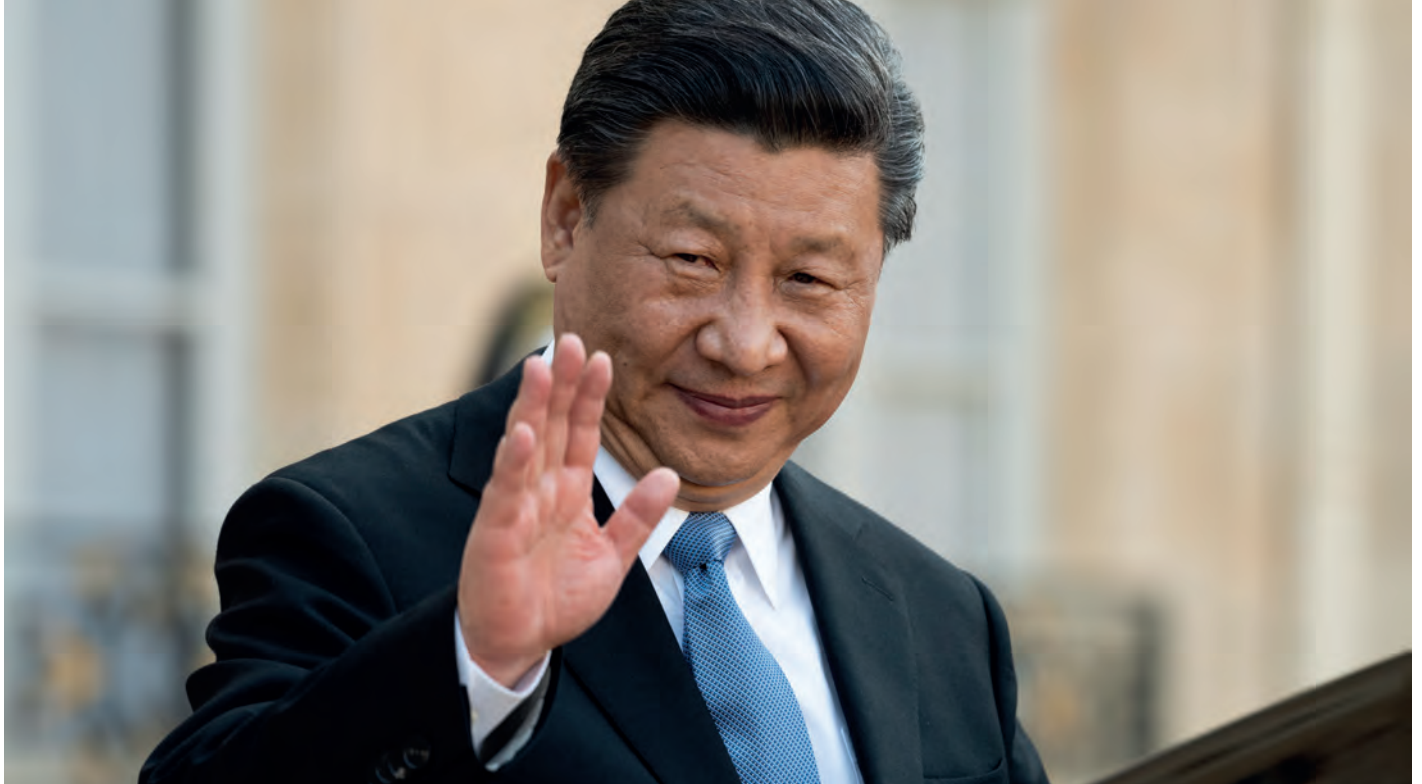
***Many brothers and sisters have  
heard them.***

***They fly freely every day and reach  
Heaven above the blue sky.***

In March of this year John was released from prison. However, the authorities have not given him his Chinese ID papers, which means he is not free to travel around China. *'I can move around freely in my city. I don't see anyone following me,'* he said. *'But I am unable to travel. I can only stay in my city. I have been removed from a small prison into a big prison that is my city!'*

Although he has lived in the US John has retained his Chinese citizenship. *'With Chinese citizenship I am able to come into China without being stopped. I love America just as much as I love China! I love China because I want to share Jesus Christ with Chinese people!'*

John expressed his thanks to those who prayed for him during his time in prison. He added: *'I would encourage you to continue to pray and show your solidarity towards all those people who are behind bars [for their faith in Christ]. Pray also for the full recovery of my civil rights and citizenship and to be able to travel as before.'*



*Xi Jinping has intensified China's crackdown on believers*

## CHINESE CHRISTIANS BRACED FOR 'HARSH WINTER'

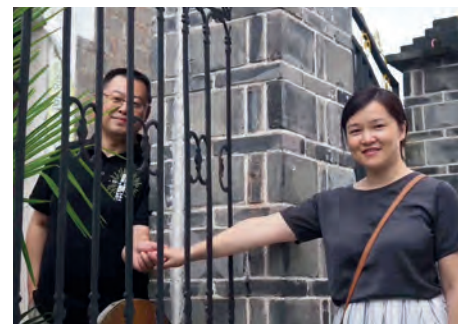
According to Release International's partner ChinaAid, *'a harsh winter is descending upon Chinese Christianity.'* Following the pattern of recent years, since the beginning of 2024, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authorities under President Xi Jinping have significantly intensified their crackdown on house churches. Christianity is now firmly viewed as a tool of the state used to bolster the CCP's authoritarian rule. The church should deliver patriotic education, interpret doctrines in accordance with core socialist values, and promote 'Xi Jinping thought'. As a result unregistered house churches are aggressively targeted and, increasingly, pastors are arrested and given harsh prison sentences.

For example, ChinaAid reports that since July 2022 members of the Xi'an Church of Abundance have been receiving oral summonses and home visits from the police and some residences have been searched. According to the summoned believers, officers threatened them in relation to their jobs and children's schooling while demanding that they surrendered church offerings, provided false testimonies, and

accused their pastor of fraud and spreading cults.

Subsequently, in August 2022, the police detained the church pastor, Lian Changnian, on the charge of 'fraud' and placed him under 'residential surveillance at a designated location' along with two other pastors. After further police intimidation and harassment of church members, the case entered court in January 2024 and if found guilty the pastors could face five years in prison. The Xi'an Church of Abundance is affiliated with the China Gospel Fellowship, a national house church movement with 10,000,000 congregants. It is one of the most developed house churches in China.

On our website we profile a number of prisoners of faith from China. Below are short updates about them. Please do continue to pray for them and their families. You can also download the profiles from our website to share with your church. These include prison addresses so you can send a letter of encouragement. (Please follow our free Reach Out! letter-writing guide if you would like to do this.)



## Pastor Wang Yi

**Arrested** Dec 2018

**Sentence** Nine years

Pastor Wang Yi is the influential leader of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu. Following a raid on his church he was arrested and later convicted of 'inciting subversion of state power.' News about Pastor Wang has been blocked since his arrest and the outside world knows little about his situation. However, his wife, Jiang Rong, was able to visit him in prison in October 2021 which was their first meeting in more than three years. At that time Jiang reported that her husband was healthy, although he had lost a lot of weight, and had been allowed to read in prison. Members of Early Rain Covenant Church continue to face relentless persecution from the authorities but remain resolute in their faith.



## Pastor Zhang Shaojie

**Arrested** Nov 2013

**Sentence** 12 years

Shaojie is the pastor of Nanle County Christian Church in Henan province. After a land-ownership dispute between the church and local authorities he was convicted on a fabricated charge of fraud and for 'gathering a crowd to disrupt the public order'. There has been no update on Pastor Shaojie for more than two years. However, we do know that, in January 2021, the authorities transferred him to another prison in Henan and several months later his family received a letter from him informing them that he was in good spirits. Officials were allowing him to see his family once a month.

## Pastor Hao Zhiwei

**Arrested** July 2019

**Sentence** Eight years

Pastor Hao Zhiwei was arrested on charges of fraud simply because she preached the gospel without approval from the state-sanctioned church and accepted payment for her work. Her case may be the first of its kind in China and since then many other house church pastors have been detained on similar charges. Pastor Hao has two sons, Paul and Moses. After the verdict she wrote a letter to her older son, Paul, telling him that God's amazing peace was with her in the prison and she sleeps well.

## Ju Dianhong & Liang Qin

**Arrested** 2016

**Sentence** 13 years and 10 years respectively

Ju and Liang were arrested in Yunan province and falsely accused of belonging to a religious sect. Both were adamant that they knew nothing of this sect and were simply following orthodox Christian teaching. After an unsuccessful appeal in 2018 the court upheld its original sentencing. There has been no update on their situation since February 2021. However, ChinaAid was able to uncover the location of the prison where they are being held in Kunming city.



## Gao's 60th birthday

Jailed human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng (pictured) turned 60 on April 20. He has been 'disappeared' for nearly seven years. Gao's wife, Geng He, continues boldly to advocate for her husband and for his release. Please continue to remember this brave believer in your prayers.

**Members of Early Rain Covenant Church continue to face relentless persecution from the authorities but remain resolute in their faith.**

## Pastor Shen Shaochun

**Arrested** 2018

**Sentence** Seven years

Pastor Shen Shaochun of the Living Water Fellowship in Huaiyuan County, Bengbu City, Anhui Province, who went to teach in Myanmar, was charged with 'organising illegal border crossing' in 2018 and sentenced to seven years in prison. After more than five years locked away his health has significantly declined. He needs daily medication for high blood pressure, his teeth ache, and he is blind in one eye; the other has significantly deteriorated.

## Fu Xuanjuan

**Arrested** 2020

**Sentence** Six years

Fu Xuanjuan, who was convicted of 'illegal business operations', has developed multiple uterine fibroids while in prison. In addition to pain, she frequently vomits, throwing up food and medicine. The prison doctor has prescribed further medication and recommended surgery, but Fu is afraid. Deng Tianyong, her husband, asks fellow Christians to pray for her. Fu, aged 46, was arrested in 2020, along with her husband and two other Christians, Feng Qunhao and Han Li, who worked at the same company. She was sentenced to six years behind bars, while the others received sentences of up to three years.

### PRAY FOR CHINESE PRISONERS

- That the whereabouts of Christian lawyers such as Gao Zhisheng would be known
- Those in prison would be strong in the Lord, know His presence and reach many with the gospel
- Those persecuting the church would come to repentance and faith

# CALLED TO BE A PRISONER

*Some Eritrean Christians have been behind bars for many years but despite the hardships have found joy in knowing God's purpose for their lives, writes Tom Hardie*

**H**ow do you survive 20 years in a brutal prison environment where torture and deprivation are common-place? That was the question I felt compelled to ask when I met up with Release International's Eritrea partner, Dr Berhane Asmelash.

Dr Asmelash, who was himself imprisoned in the 1980s, told me: *'Once a Christian realises that they are called by God to be a prisoner their attitude changes completely and they are able to survive.'*

*'If you recognise that God has taken you into that place for a purpose then you become strong and even joyful. It also helps the wife or husband outside to know that their loved one has been called by God to this, otherwise they can get very depressed.'*

*'Having said that, it has not been easy. They have missed family and friends deeply. Those who have been in prison for around 20 years may have missed children growing up, time that you cannot get back. It is really painful.'*

That is on top of the physical deprivations they have suffered. Dr Asmelash said that prisoners could be held in solitary in underground cells. Sickness and lack of nutrition through scarce and poor food were common-place. He said that Christians were no longer held in shipping containers and the torture of believers had stopped to a large extent, mainly because many had died and news was coming out about their deaths, which the Government had wanted to keep secret.

*'Being together as believers has helped.'*

*At first the authorities put Christians with other inmates but then they realised that more and more prisoners were coming to faith so they have now put all the Christians together on their own to stop them evangelising.*

*'However, that has given them the fellowship they have needed. They have spiritual strength and want to survive.'*

*'So the church has grown in the prison. When non-believers see the peace that they have naturally they ask: how can these people be happy in prison, and even singing? So they are converted and when they are released they then become evangelists themselves!'*

***'The good news has gone into prisons and the military where it is harder to control.'***

He said: *'At the same time the church outside has grown because believers have seen that it is possible to survive prison and also that their fellow Christians believe enough to be willing*

to pay this price; it emboldens the “free” church to spread the word and not fear the consequences. They have become stronger because they have seen people who are serious about their faith.

*‘Hence the non-Orthodox church has grown dramatically since it was banned in 2002. When I left Eritrea in 1999, evangelicals were just 1 per cent of the population but now they are everywhere, in every village. There could be up to 100 times more believers in Eritrea than when I left.’*

He added: *‘Trying to stop Christianity has actually increased it. When we had open worship few people would go to church but, now the church is shut, the good news has gone into prisons and the military where it is harder to control.’*

*‘The Government tries to use the Orthodox church to fight the evangelicals because it cannot do it alone, but a lot of priests have become evangelicals themselves.’*

There are about 400 Christians currently imprisoned in Eritrea but the precise figure is hard to gauge because many have been detained without trial or charge. Last year a number were released but then more were arrested. Since the start of this year around 80 have been arrested including three families who were discovered worshipping together in March and more than 30 who were detained in west and central Eritrea in April.

### ***‘It is your prayers that keep me alive’***

Among those who have been imprisoned for 20 years are: Kiflu Gebremeskel, Futsum Gebrenegus, Million Gebreselasie, Tekleab Menghisteab, Haile Naizghe and Rev G. Gebregioris.

Come March 2025, another, Kidane Weldou, will join that ‘20-year’ group. Mussie Ezaz, who was first arrested in 2007, is another long-term prisoner.

Dr Asmelash urged UK Christians to pray for all those in prison. *‘One wrote to me, saying: “It is your prayers that keep me alive.”’*



Dr Asmelash spent time with prisoners who were on death row and led several to Christ. He could have escaped on numerous occasions, but believed God wanted him to remain. When he was finally able to leave the country, he came to the UK and has campaigned tirelessly since for persecuted Christians in Eritrea.

His book is endorsed by Fiona Bruce MP, vice-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, who says: *‘This book needed to be written – and needs to be read.’*

*‘The world should know of the suffering and bravery of thousands of Eritreans, barbarically imprisoned, tortured, and killed – simply on account of their beliefs.’*

*‘May this book compel all who read it to action – to stand with and support, in whatever way we each can, the many Christians in Eritrea today who suffer simply because of their faith in Jesus Christ.’*

• *Brother, I Have Come to Arrest You* (priced £10 including p&p) is available on our website estore ([releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org)) or by calling 01689 823491.

**The Word, page 22**

## COMPELLING READ

Release International has recently published Dr Asmelash’s biography, *Brother, I Have Come to Arrest You*, which tells the story of his imprisonment in strife-torn Ethiopia in the 1980s. He was accused of being anti-revolutionary because of his Christian activities.

## BOOK TOUR

Berhane Asmelash will be visiting churches in the following regions to promote his book, sign copies and share his story:



*London & South*  
Sunday June 30 –  
Sunday July 7

*Scotland & Border Counties*  
Wednesday August 14 –  
Wednesday August 21

*North & Midlands*  
Wednesday October 16 –  
Wednesday October 23

*Wales & West*  
Wednesday November 20 –  
Wednesday November 27

Please check our events page [www.releaseinternational.org/events](http://www.releaseinternational.org/events) for venue details.



# CHURCH LEADERS CAUGHT IN CRUEL LEGAL LIMBO

*Recent laws in Algeria, which contravene the constitution, forbid Christians from sharing their faith*

## *A senior Algerian pastor tells Release International's John Lawson how believers are paying a high price for phenomenal church growth in recent years*

**I**n a recent interview with Release International, a senior leader in the Algerian church requested prayer for the 53 Algerian Christians, almost all pastors, who have been arrested and prosecuted in the past five years simply for living out their faith. Five have already spent months behind bars, but the majority have prison sentences hanging over them (usually of two to five years) pending appeal at the Supreme Court.

Although grateful that currently there are none in prison, he spoke frankly about the impact these long, drawn-out, and sometimes bizarrely unpredictable, legal proceedings have had on them and their families,

contributing to stress-related conditions such as hyper-tension, diabetes, psychological trauma and exhaustion.

In Algeria, a North African country with close ties to France and other EU states, and perhaps not keen to earn the same kind of reputation and international isolation as Eritrea, it seems the authorities are trying to intimidate Christians through the prolonged threat of incarceration without actually jailing them. A veneer of due legal process through interminable waits for Supreme Court appeal hearings thinly disguises the fact that Christians are being arrested, tried, convicted

and then sentenced to imprisonment and fined in contravention of the freedom of worship and other civil liberties enshrined in their constitution. Their places of worship are being shut down, with 43 out of the 44 member churches of the Protestant Association of Algeria (EPA) having been closed since 2018, for holding 'unauthorised worship' despite the EPA having registered as an official denomination in 1994. Recent laws, which also contravene the constitution, forbid Algerian Christians from sharing their faith with Muslims (around 98 per cent of Algeria's 44 million population would identify as Sunni).

As a result Christians are constitutionally free to practise their faith, but outlawed from sharing it; are members of a legally registered church, whose places of worship are all closed; while many of their leaders

are convicted criminals with jail sentences hanging over their heads, and yet, for now, still free. Although relatively short, these two to five-year prison sentences cannot be completed if they are not started so remain over people indefinitely, creating an atmosphere of pressured uncertainty. This is a direct response to the phenomenal church growth seen in Algeria in one generation: Christians numbered from the tens in the mid-1980s to the tens of thousands by 2016.

## A sign of love from the UK

The church leader expressed his thanks to UK Christians for their support during this time of increased persecution and requested continued prayer for a once vibrant and still very young church - almost entirely comprised of new Muslim-background believers - that has been forced underground.

He thanked Release International for the financial support that we have started to give which helps to provide for some of the affected families as well as helping to cover some of the legal costs of their defence and appeals.

He said: *'This aid, truly, the brothers and sisters who have benefited from it, have perceived this as a sign of love and of solidarity on the part of the body of Christ in the UK. It's a sign of love and solidarity, and that's what makes the brothers and sisters want to continue; truly it encourages them, it really makes them want to continue, to walk the path, to persevere in the faith. And above all, it's proof that we're not alone, we're not forgotten, but we have brothers and sisters who think of us and pray for us. And that helps us a lot in our walk.'*

Although burdened by the ongoing challenges, he remains hopeful. *'I think that God has made a promise, that God has visited this nation, even if we pass today through a very difficult time, but I know that this situation contributes positively to the affirmation of the church. I know that the church in Algeria is no exception. Like everywhere else, churches go through times of peace and of*



Algerian gendarmes seal shut the doors of a church building Photo: Morning Star News

*adversity. I think that's the church's destiny. Everyone knows that. God asks us, simply, today, to be confident, to remain faithful as a Christian in Algeria, all the while knowing that this will be just a passing persecution. God has happy plans for our country, especially for his church here.'*

Please continue to pray for Christians in Algeria who are facing persecution, especially those suffering ill-health as a result of their trials. Pray for courage, wisdom and patience, and that they will all retain their hope in God.

## Please pray

- That the State will renew the registration of the Protestant Church of Algeria and re-open the 43 churches it has closed
- For an end to the harassment church leaders face from the security services each time they enter or leave their country
- That the Supreme Court will hear the appeal cases soon, and strike them down as un-constitutional, with full pardons for all who have been wrongly convicted
- For authorisation to import Bibles, through the Biblical Society of Algeria, and for the freeing of a consignment which has been held up in port for two years
- For the physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing of believers, particularly those who have suffered ill-health
- That God would continue to grow His church in Algeria through the proclamation of the gospel



# Stateless but still serving the Lord

*Jack Norman is inspired by an Iranian couple forced out of Turkey who are now blessing believers in Kurdistan*

**W**e read in Chapter 8 of the book of Acts that during the first major persecution against the church in Jerusalem many had to flee, but as they fled they continued to share the good news.

Many Christians who escape hostile governments today continue to live this out.

For Iranian believers a natural place for them to flee has been Turkey, but since 2018, when the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) handed the processing of refugees to the Turkish authorities, this has become increasingly problematic. While Turkey remains a country that welcomes refugees from Iran, Christians from that country have been experiencing significant

pressure in recent years with many forcibly deported back to Iran or to one of the few other countries that will accept them.

On a recent trip to Kurdistan, an autonomous region in northern Iraq and one of the places still open to Christians being forced out of Turkey, I met one family who had direct experience of this.

Like many Iranians who are coming to faith, it began when 'Ruth'\* had a vision of Jesus standing over the bed of a sick relative who had been declared 'brain-dead' and saying that he would live. After that she had a call from doctors who urged her to come to the hospital because a miracle had happened: the relative had recovered! This was the beginning of their faith journey.

Having fled Iran in 2016, not initially as Christians, and then having come to faith, Ruth and 'Mark'\* served God in Turkey until 2023. Life had been going well for them and the church they led in their home had grown to the point where it needed to move into a larger building. Around 120 members were attending services.

The couple's problems began when they started helping Afghan Christians who had fled to Turkey, offering them food and practical assistance. They were reported to police, who questioned them several times and eventually stopped a service they were leading.

Soon after that they were ordered to leave the country. At first they were sent to Georgia, but as soon as they arrived there they were immediately put back on a flight to Istanbul. Facing more questions from the Turkish authorities Ruth rang a friend and asked them to get her and Mark tickets to Erbil in Kurdistan; and that night they left Turkey.

*'If we open up ourselves to the Lord and let Him use us, we can be His hands on earth.'*

However, like so many Iranian Christians, Mark and Ruth are now effectively stateless. Seen by many as problematic because of the actions of the Iranian Government, they cannot travel on their Iranian passports and they are not eligible for travel documents from another country until they gain citizenship.

Although they long to be able to travel, they told me they knew God's hand was upon them. Mark believes God wanted him in Kurdistan because He wanted someone who could teach believers using the Farsi language. They are also helping other Christian families who need to get out of Turkey.

As we finished our conversation, Mark told me: *'I believe if we open up ourselves to the Lord and let Him use us, we can be His hands on earth.'*

\*Names changed to protect identities



Mark Lipdo

## Nigerian partner to visit UK

*Join us to hear first hand how your support is helping to restore broken lives*

**A**s part of a programme to offer churches the opportunity to develop direct relationships with our partners, we will be hosting a special visit to the UK from the founder and head of Stefanos Foundation in Nigeria, Mark Lipdo.

Mark will be speaking at a small number of venues in the UK in September to share how your support is helping to heal the hearts and minds of traumatised Christians in northern and central Nigeria.

Through our Building One Body church partnership programme we are offering churches in the UK the opportunity to develop a deeper relationship with some of our key international projects such as the work done by Stefanos.

Churches who join the partnership commit to promoting their chosen

project among their congregations, as well as giving regularly and praying specifically for the work. In turn, we provide regular project updates and, wherever possible, we aim to give partner churches the opportunity to meet a representative of the project they support in person.

Release International supports several projects run by Stefanos, including the provision of Bible-based trauma-healing workshops for Christians who have been impacted by violence and displacement. Victims are supported to express their pain and bring it to Christ. By the grace of God, they are enabled to forgive those who have hurt them and rebuild their lives.

In response to the killing of 230 people in a series of attacks in the Mangu area of Plateau state between April and November last year, Stefanos organised a special trauma-

healing workshop for 36 women who had lost their husbands.

Datet who participated in the programme said, *'Before I came here, I had deep wounds in my heart, but now I am healed and doing better.'* Another widow named Plangan said, *'Since I came here, I have spent a lot of time crying, but I have also laughed a lot, because I have found joy and peace in my heart. I am very grateful for these teachings that you prepared for us. These teachings have strengthened me.'*

Several of our Building One Body church partners have chosen to support this project and Mark will be spending time with them when he visits. We are delighted to be able to make these events open to all our supporters, so, if you live locally, please do come along to hear from Mark as he shares about the powerful work Release International is supporting in Nigeria.

- **Sunday, September 22** | 6.30pm | St Peter's Parish Centre, 347 Church Road, Bolton, BL1 5RR
- **Wednesday September 25** | 7.30pm | Smithton Church, Murray Road, Inverness, IV2 7YU

Additionally, on Saturday, September 21, Mark will be sharing during our Volunteer and Supporter Day at St Peter's Parish Centre in Bolton. The event begins at 12 noon with a buffet lunch.

Please check our events page [www.releaseinternational.org/events](http://www.releaseinternational.org/events) for further details.

If you would like to find out more about how your church can become a Building One Body partner please contact our Lead Engagement Manager, James Fraser, at [jfraser@releaseinternational.org](mailto:jfraser@releaseinternational.org).

- Mark Lipdo is the founder and CEO of the Stefanos Foundation, a Christian-based human rights, advocacy and relief organisation working to address the violent conflict in Nigeria. He is the author of the book *Killings in North and Central Nigeria: a threat to ethno-religious freedom and democracy*, and is a Master Facilitator in Trauma Healing.

## More dates for Artless



**A**s publicised in our April *Voice* magazine, following the overwhelmingly positive reception of its play, *If Prison Walls Could Speak*, Artless Theatre Company is continuing to tour the production this year.

Described by Premier Christianity Magazine as 'bold, innovative and shocking to the core', the one-man drama movingly portrays the story of Release International's associate ministry worker Petr Jasek (pictured), who was imprisoned in Sudan in 2015 because of his Christian work.

As well as a late-night showing at the Cedarwood Festival in North Yorkshire in July we are pleased to announce several other dates below.



### North of England

**Saturday July 13** – Cedarwood Festival

**Friday September 6** – Fernwood Community Church, Newark, Nottinghamshire

**Saturday September 7** – Jubilee Church, Hull

**Sunday September 8** – Gateway Church, Leeds

### West of England and Wales

**Tuesday September 24** – Holy Trinity Barnstaple

**Thursday September 26** – Plymouth Methodist Central Hall

### Scotland

**Sunday October 6** – Burnside Blairbeth Church, nr Glasgow

### South of England

**Friday October 18** – Wilmington Community Church, Dartford

**Saturday October 19** – Christ Church, Banstead

**Sunday October 20** – Holy Trinity, Wallington

**Friday November 8** – Highgate International Church, North London

Further dates are still being secured in each region. Please check our events page [www.releaseinternational.org/events](http://www.releaseinternational.org/events) for further details and for information on how to book tickets.



**I**t may seem a long way off but now is a good time to start preparing for this autumn's International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP).

IDOP is a well-established date in the Christian calendar, and provides a focused reminder of the importance of praying for persecuted believers.

This year it falls on Sunday, November 3, although churches who regularly mark the event will sometimes choose another Sunday in November.

There are three ways you could become actively involved this year:

First, Release International is taking part in an online event on the day. We will join friends from the Evangelical Alliance, Open Doors and CSW in a live online-streamed event at 7.30pm. We will present a short film from one of the countries we are actively involved in and there will be times for people watching to pray.

If your church does not have a regular evening service you could consider inviting friends round to watch the online presentation. If you do have an evening service (and you have the facility to view online events) you could ask your church's leaders whether it could be watched after, or as part of, the service.

Secondly, Release International will be providing downloadable resources to support you, if you decide to mark IDOP in your church (at any point during November). These will appear under the *Get Involved* section of our website, where there is a dedicated menu for IDOP each year ([releaseinternational.org/idop](http://releaseinternational.org/idop)).

Finally, you could invite a Release International regional speaker to your church on a Sunday in November to mark IDOP. See box on this page for their contact numbers.

## INVITE A SPEAKER

Our team of experienced speakers are available to join your church or online meeting to help you support and pray for persecuted Christians. They would love to hear from you!

### Ireland:

Stephen on 028 9334 0014 or 07933 313169

### London & South:

Jonny on 07861 656269

### Midlands & North:

Allister on 07916 396178

### Scotland:

James on 07434 894016

### Wales & West of England:

Paul on 07861 651139



Helen Berhane whose book proved the inspiration for a Release International volunteer

## Fundraising idea hatched after *Nightingale* review

A simple request to write a book review of *Song of the Nightingale*, Helen Berhane's moving account of her time in prison in Eritrea, was just the start of a journey helping persecuted Christians for Release International volunteer Moira.

*'I was shocked by what I read, which started me on my own journey to becoming a church representative for Release International,' she said. 'I realised the importance of getting the message out about the persecution of Christians around the world.'*

Wanting to engage further, Moira set up a small baking stall at her church in Paisley to raise funds to help persecuted believers. *'Prayers are a powerful force, but money is also needed,' she said.*

*'I joined the community group which allowed me to have a team helping to put together an annual sale for Release International, which now takes place on Palm Sunday. We sell a wide variety of items from home-bakes to knitted chickens!'*

This year's Easter sale proved the most successful to date with a total raised of more than £300.

Our thanks to Moira for all her hard work raising not only much-needed funds to help our persecuted family practically but also highlighting the issue of Christian persecution with those around her.

- Helen Berhane's inspiring story, *Song of the Nightingale*, is available on the estore at [releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org).



## Challenge yourself and help the persecuted!

If you enjoy walking, trekking or running, why not take part in one of the Ultra Challenge® series of treks and runs while at the same time raising sponsorship for Release International's work.

You may be a walker and new to endurance events, a seasoned trekker, or perhaps a marathon runner looking to up the distance but whatever your pace, experience or age there are many fantastic events to choose from of varying distances from 10km to 100km. You will be fully supported along the way and can take part as an individual or with others as a team.

Whether it's setting out in stunning coastal scenery, along a historic towpath or along trails in England's wonderful countryside, your challenge will test you on an unforgettable journey. Most will walk at a pace that suits them, many will jog parts and some will run the whole course!

*'I would thoroughly recommend taking on one of these challenges,' said Paul Robinson, Release International CEO. 'It's a great way to test yourself, make new friends while all the time raising funds to help our persecuted family.'*

Visit [www.ultrachallenge.com](http://www.ultrachallenge.com) for the full list of challenges and how to sign up.

## SUMMER EVENTS

In July we will be attending all three weeks of the Keswick Convention, Cedarwood Festival, ReFuel, Keswick Port Stewart and New Wine. Additionally, we will be at Bangor Worldwide and the Aber Conference in August. It will be great to see you there!

Recycle this magazine: share it with a friend!



**A letter from a friend – in prison for his faith – changed my understanding of suffering, writes Dr Berhane Asmelash of Release Eritrea**

**‘Affliction is my calling’**

**W**e can understand how the Apostle Paul sees his own suffering when he writes ‘... that no one should be shaken by these afflictions, for you yourselves know that we are appointed for this’ (1 Thessalonians 3:3).

He knows he was called for that type of ministry. I never thought in my life that suffering could sometimes be a calling from God, until I recently received a letter from a friend, who has spent years in prison for his faith. In his letter he wrote: ‘Paul was trying to comfort the believers that every affliction suffered by Christians happens with God’s plan and will. That is what I also understand when I meditate on my own experience of suffering, sadness and the pain of years in prison. I came to realise that affliction is my calling and I am in God’s divine plan. This understanding has filled my heart with joy and it has also comforted my soul.’

As I read the letter, I started to ask myself: can affliction be part of the calling of Christian ministry? If we read the Scripture carefully that is what it is telling us. In Colossians 1:24 Paul says: *‘I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church.’* It was his understanding of his affliction that gave Paul joy. Jesus also said: *‘Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name’* (John 12: 27-28.) We are not glorifying affliction and suffering is not something we choose; it is painful. Even for Jesus it was so troubling, but

the Lord accepted it as His calling and did not try to escape from it. Instead He wanted to see God glorified.

My friend has admitted that it is painful to be in prison and the separation from his family is unbearable, but still he rejoices in the Lord. Paul said in Romans chapter 5: *‘Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.’* (Romans 5: 3-5)

I can see that my friend’s acceptance of his affliction has given him an internal joy, and this is because the Holy Spirit has flooded his heart with God’s love. I think that is how he became aware of his calling in prison.

Other prisoners also share this idea. Recently I was talking to the wife of one of the prisoners of faith. Her husband was arrested in 2004 and he is still in prison. When I spoke

to her on the telephone, she said: *‘My husband has been called to that ministry, to suffer for Christ, and this comforts my heart.’*

In the hymn, *‘Tis good, Lord, to be here*, we read:

*‘Tis good, Lord, to be here,  
yet we may not remain;  
but since you bid us leave the mount,  
come with us to the plain.*

Yes, it is good to be on the mountain-top, where you can enjoy the presence and glory of God, but sometimes we are not allowed to remain there and we are led to go down to the valley; but the good thing is that Jesus goes down with us, and it is the presence of the Lord in the valley that gives us joy in our afflictions.

- Rev Dr Berhane Asmelash is a Release International partner and co-founder of Release Eritrea, which is a global partnership of Eritrean evangelical Christians standing in solidarity with the persecuted Eritrean church.

**INSPIRING FAITH**



***‘Not favourable but unfavourable circumstances are the hammers that shape the saints of God.’***

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



# SABINA

TORTURED FOR CHRIST  
THE NAZI YEARS

## Inspiring Discipleship Course

- Discipleship course based on the DVD *Sabina - Tortured for Christ* (the Nazi years)
- Contains extracts from *Sabina* DVD, study guide, *Wurmbrand* book and other stories
- Available for just £10 using the insert card or by calling 01689 823491

## Regular support is vital

Regular giving (even small amounts) through a Direct Debit helps us to plan ministry support around the world. It is a great way to show ongoing love and concern for persecuted believers.

*giftaid it*

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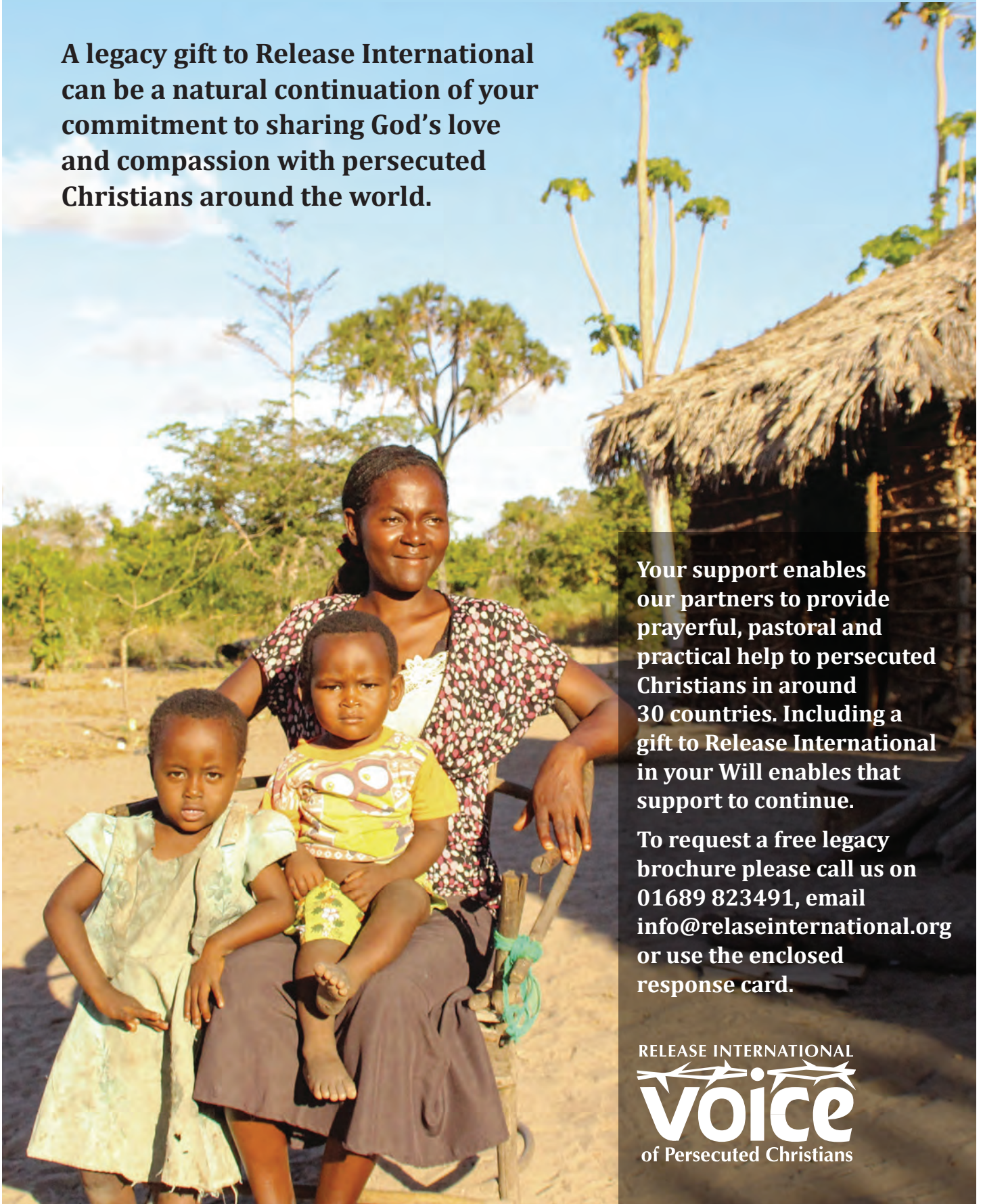
# *Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?*

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

**Your support enables our partners to provide prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in around 30 countries. Including a gift to Release International in your Will enables that support to continue.**

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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
  
of Persecuted Christians



# prayershield

July– Sept 2024



Remembering  
the bomb blast  
victims in  
Sri Lanka

## JULY 2024

*Heavenly Father,*

*Strengthen our resolve to stand in prayer with our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted for following Your Son.*

*Be with them as they go through trials of many kinds. May they know Your comfort, peace and presence sustaining them.*

*I pray also for all those who work tirelessly to help them; equip and encourage them by Your loving Spirit.*

*In Jesus' name,*

*Amen*

## SRI LANKA

**MONDAY 1:** Pray for all those who suffer ongoing trauma that was caused by the bomb blasts at churches at Easter 2019. Please remember especially Mrs Subashini whose husband was killed, leaving her with two children to bring up alone.

**TUESDAY 2:** Pray for Mr Senarathnia who sustained extensive leg injuries and hearing loss from the 2019 bomb explosions. His legs were broken in four places and he has had 11 operations, but is still not able to work and is dependent on his wife and children.

**WEDNESDAY 3:** Pastor Rasika Premanjani was converted to Christ from a background that included Buddhism and witchcraft. Pray for her as she seeks to reach out to others

from a similar background. She has seen many lives healed and transformed through her faithful witness.

**THURSDAY 4:** Pray for Release International partners as they work hard to advocate for freedom of religious belief in Sri Lanka. They do this by conducting research, documenting violations and raising awareness.

**FRIDAY 5:** Pray for our partners who provide legal aid for Christian pastors who have been falsely accused or are being investigated because of their Christian activity.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL  
**voice**  
of Persecuted Christians

**SATURDAY 6:** Praise God for a new project supported by Release International that seeks to support pastors who have endured persecution. Pray that the Lord would use this training and mentoring to produce resilient pastors and churches.

**SUNDAY 7:** Thank God for a Release International project training a new generation of Christian leaders across Sri Lanka. Pray that He would work powerfully in and through this initiative.

## BURKINA FASO

**MONDAY 8:** Pray for our partner, Pastor 'Samuel', and his ministry to displaced Christians. May God protect him as he travels all over the country and give him wisdom on prioritising resources.

**TUESDAY 9:** Pray for the pastors and churches ministering to all the displaced people in Burkina Faso; that Christians will be helped to stand firm and others will be brought into the faith.

**WEDNESDAY 10:** Pray for 'Annette' and other widows whose husbands have been killed for sharing the gospel and who have also been displaced. Pray that they may find support in their new locations and God's comfort.

**THURSDAY 11:** Pray for wisdom for those displaced pastors who are keen to return to the places they left. May God's call to them be clear and may He give them peace whether He is calling them to stay or return.



*Militants in Burkina Faso have attacked buses and killed passengers*

**FRIDAY 12:** Pray that all the displaced children whom our partner is supporting through educational programmes will be able to learn and make friends in their new situations.

**SATURDAY 13:** Pray for the Government and security forces battling the Islamist insurgency. May they serve their people with courage, justice and integrity and restore peace to their nation.

**SUNDAY 14:** Pray for those being recruited into terrorist and criminal gangs; that God would call them out to a different life and provide them with honest ways to make a living.

## BHUTAN

**MONDAY 15:** Bhutan's constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, in practice, evangelistic work that seeks the conversion of Buddhists is illegal. Pray that Bhutan would open its doors to a vibrant Christian witness.

**TUESDAY 16:** Christians are

often viewed as followers of a foreign, Western religion and can be subject to various forms of discrimination. Buddhists who become Christians can even lose their citizenship. Pray that Christians would be able to stand firm in their faith and multiply.

**WEDNESDAY 17:** It is extremely difficult for Christians to meet publicly in Bhutan and church buildings are illegal. Pray for Christians who are forced to practise their faith at home or in secret.

**THURSDAY 18:** Converts to Christianity endure threats and pressures from local community leaders and Buddhist religious leaders. Christians have lost jobs or have been unable to find employment because of their faith. Ask the Lord to provide for them.

**FRIDAY 19:** Though small numbers of Bibles are allowed into the nation legally, the Government continues

to restrict widespread distribution. Most copies must be smuggled in. Pray for successful Bible distributions.

**SATURDAY 20:** Pray for a Release International partner as he oversees the only theological seminary in Bhutan. His focus is to offer discipleship and biblical training in order to see a new generation of Christian leaders equipped to serve the church.

**SUNDAY 21:** Praise the Lord that the church is growing throughout Bhutan. Pray that Christians will continue to be bold in their faith.

## EGYPT

**MONDAY 22:** Thank God for the significant difference our partners are making through the Strength to Stand groups. Working with women in one of Cairo's 'garbage cities', they are having a significant impact on the lives of those who attend as well as their families.

**TUESDAY 23:** Thank God that the Strength to Stand groups have now documented the situation of more than 12,000 households in one of Cairo's garbage areas, with many of these households receiving help.

**WEDNESDAY 24:** Thank God that the women being helped by Strength to Stand groups are not only receiving practical help, but are also being encouraged to grow deeper in their faith, which in turn is strengthening their churches.

**THURSDAY 25:** Continue to pray for the project teams in Egypt which provide poverty-stricken Christian women with the

wherewithal to live productive, faith-filled lives.

**FRIDAY 26:** Please pray for wisdom for our partners in Egypt as they work to meet the needs of Sudanese refugees. Pray that God would guide the team to those in greatest need.

**SATURDAY 27:** Pray that the Sudanese refugees in Egypt being supported by our partners will not only be provided with practical aid but will also find eternal hope in Christ.

**SUNDAY 28:** Pray for protection for our partners' staff working in rural areas of Upper Egypt. They ask that we pray for protection, wisdom and guidance in what can be a hostile environment.

## UGANDA

**MONDAY 29:** Twaha Namwoyo and his wife, Nadiimu Katooko, were martyred in February, shortly after converting from Islam. Pray that their orphaned children would know Christ's love, peace, healing and protection.

**TUESDAY 30:** Philemon Shuha was badly beaten and hospitalised as he was preparing an evangelistic event. While in hospital, his house was set on fire. Pray for healing for Philemon as well as peace and protection and a rebuilt home for him, his wife and three children.

**WEDNESDAY 31:** Pray for the family and friends of Kiisa Masolo who was martyred by extremists in early March for leading others to Christ.

## AUGUST 2024

### LEBANON

**THURSDAY 1:** Pray for the leaders of Release International partners in Lebanon. Pray for wisdom and grace for them to be able to deal with the many needs they are confronted with in challenging circumstances.

**FRIDAY 2:** Pray for ministries providing relief among Syrian refugees in Lebanon and for all those who depend on this ministry. May they find God's love within it and share that love with others.

**SATURDAY 3:** Pray for young Syrians and others who are learning about peace, love and God's forgiveness – often for the first time – through the ministry of a Release International partner. May they be the generation to bring peace to their troubled region.

**SUNDAY 4:** Pray for the many practical services which are provided to thousands of Syrian refugees living in tented camps, including laundry facilities. May these practical acts of care bring new hope as well as practical assistance to those they serve.

**MONDAY 5:** Pray for peace in Lebanon and against escalation of the conflict between Hezbollah, the political party and militant group, and Israel. Pray particularly for all those living in border regions who are most affected by this crisis.

**TUESDAY 6:** Pray for Heart for Lebanon and other missions

and agencies which are showing God's love and care to the Lebanese people, to Syrian refugees and others in need.

**WEDNESDAY 7:** Pray for the economy of Lebanon and for all those struggling with high prices due to the multiple overlapping crises affecting this country and the wider Middle East region.

## NIGERIA

**THURSDAY 8:** Please pray for all those in Nigeria who have been abducted by Islamic extremists or extortioners. A number of the schoolgirls who were kidnapped by Boko Haram in Chibok, Borno state, 10 years ago have yet to return home. Pray for their protection and safe return. May their families know peace of mind and that God's loving eye is always upon them.

**FRIDAY 9:** We pray for all those who have lost their possessions and land from recent attacks in central and northern Nigeria. May God restore to them from the riches of His love and grace.

**SATURDAY 10:** Pray for the safety of Release International partners in Nigeria who carry on their work in one of the most dangerous regions in the world: Stefanos Foundation and its leader, Mark Lipdo; and Ven Mark Mukan, another partner.

**SUNDAY 11:** Lift to God in prayer churches and pastors that have been targeted and

attacked in Nigeria. May the believers remain strong in their faith despite ongoing threats.

**MONDAY 12:** Please pray for those who have been displaced by the violence in Nigeria. Many have lost their homes or feel it is too unsafe to return to their villages.

**TUESDAY 13:** Please pray for Christians who have been left traumatised by attacks on their villages and homes. Ask God to grant them peace and to know that they are not forgotten by other believers around the world. Pray especially for God's blessing on the trauma-healing workshops that Release International helps to fund.

**WEDNESDAY 14:** Please pray for emotional and physical healing for those living with medical conditions as a result of terrorist attacks – loss of

limbs in some cases as well as other physical trauma.

## TANZANIA

**THURSDAY 15:** Pray for Christian teachers from a school in eastern Tanzania whose landlord was asked to evict them by members of the community opposed to a Christian presence in the area. Praise God that the landlord has thus far refused to comply.

**FRIDAY 16:** Pray for a church leader working in a predominantly non-Christian community whose two young children had indicated a desire to follow their friends' religion. They no longer felt that way after he spoke to them but it is still a concern for the pastor.

**SATURDAY 17:** Pray for a pastor who has planted a church in a potentially hostile



*It is ten years since girls from Chibok were kidnapped*

environment. 'There are many who want to hear about Jesus but are very frightened,' he said. Thank God that he was able to share the gospel with them by going from house to house.

**SUNDAY 18:** Pray for those who have accepted Jesus but are afraid of being separated from their community or even chased out of their village. They have been asking the pastor, 'How will we live?'

**MONDAY 19:** Praise God for innovative tracts that have been created by a church leader in a potentially dangerous part of the country. Thank God for the pastor's boldness in handing out these materials and that people are taking them and showing interest.

**TUESDAY 20:** Pray that Christian families who are living in majority Muslim areas will receive good healthcare when they go to clinics. Sometimes they are refused treatment when it becomes clear they do not have an Islamic name.

**WEDNESDAY 21:** Pray that God will protect the hearts and minds of the children in Tanzanian church families who have chosen to live in non-Christian areas. Pray especially that they will not feel isolated.

## KENYA

**THURSDAY 22:** Pray for Grace and her children, whose house was set ablaze by terrorists. Last year, Grace's

husband was martyred by militants. Thankfully she and her children were away at the time of the attack on their home.

**FRIDAY 23:** Mary's husband was murdered by terrorists last autumn in eastern Kenya. Praise God for the strong faith shown by Mary and that the Lord will continue to comfort her and provide for her two daughters.

**SATURDAY 24:** Praise God for the growing number of Somali Kenyans who are turning to Christ – and particularly that God is bringing whole families to Himself.

**SUNDAY 25:** Praise God that a Release International team was able to visit and provide comfort to a Christian woman who had experienced the suicide of a close friend she had been discipling. Please pray for all those affected by this tragic death.

**MONDAY 26:** Pray for Somali Christian brothers and sisters in Kenya who have been helped to start up small businesses. Pray that their enterprises will be fruitful and provide much-needed income for their families' needs.

**TUESDAY 27:** Praise God that with Release International support training has taken place for 13 Christian workers to help them to provide eye-care and earn a living by selling glasses in a number of remote areas of Kenya.

**WEDNESDAY 28:** Pray for the ministry of these eye-care workers (see previous day); that they are able to earn a living and share the gospel with many in the communities in which they are working.

## ETHIOPIA

**THURSDAY 29:** Please pray for the growing numbers of Ethiopian gospel workers who risk so much for the sake of Christ. Pray particularly for those reaching into areas where families and communities can be hostile to the gospel message.

**FRIDAY 30:** 'Mihret' came to faith at the end of 2022 and was baptised. Last year her sister 'Genet' came to Christ as well and was also baptised. When their brother found out that they had become Christians he prepared to kill both of them. Pray for their spiritual and physical wellbeing as they follow Christ in exile from their family and community.

**SATURDAY 31:** During the past few months significant numbers from an unreached people group have turned to Christ and been baptised. Pray for them as they undergo intensive discipleship and training in evangelism and that their witness to their own communities would be effective and God-honouring.

## SEPTEMBER 2024

### IRAQ

**SUNDAY 1:** Pray for Rev Canon Faez Jirjees of St George's Church, Baghdad. Thank God for his steadfast ministry and leadership and pray for continued strength, wisdom and peace for him and his family and God's blessing upon all those to whom he ministers.

**MONDAY 2:** Pray for the Hope for all Nations church run by our partner in Kurdistan which recently received its official licence. Pray God's blessing on its ministry to Christians who have fled persecution elsewhere and to new Muslim-background believers.

**TUESDAY 3:** Pray for the safe houses operated by our partner which provide sanctuary to those who have fled persecution or abuse. Pray for comfort, protection and a lasting peace for those who find refuge there.

**WEDNESDAY 4:** Pray for the widows, children and other vulnerable people who rely on food parcels from our partner in Kurdistan. May these packages be of spiritual encouragement to them as well as meeting their physical needs.

**THURSDAY 5:** Pray for the vocational training activities provided by our partner in Kurdistan. May they provide new hope as well as new skills and opportunities

for those who are learning together.

**FRIDAY 6:** Pray for all the displaced people and refugees living in camps across Kurdistan. Ask that God would grant wisdom, courage and compassion to the authorities who are seeking long-term solutions and considering whether to close some of the camps.

**SATURDAY 7:** Pray for peace in Iraq, which is buffeted by political storms in Iran and other neighbouring Middle Eastern states. Pray for wisdom for its national leaders and for the regional authorities in Kurdistan and for peaceful progress on settling Kurdistan's political future.

### MALAYSIA

**SUNDAY 8:** Pray for the Government of Malaysia as it attempts sensitively to handle the growing political pressure from local radical groups.

**MONDAY 9:** Pray for the believers, particularly from Malay backgrounds, who are experiencing an increase in intolerance towards them.

**TUESDAY 10:** Pray for fairness and acceptance to be maintained within society, especially in light of the recent attempt by a *halal* chain of bakeries to ban the writing of 'Merry Christmas' on their products.

**WEDNESDAY 11:** Pray for wisdom and discernment

among the population, particularly Christian voters, as some radical groups attempt to sow disunity within the country, calling for bans and prohibitions. They claim these are in line with Islamic teaching.

**THURSDAY 12:** Pray for tolerance to be shown by the public, some of whom have been urged on by radical groups, throwing petrol bombs at a number of large supermarket chains, creating tension and anxiety among the majority of the population and fear among the minority Christians.

**FRIDAY 13:** Pray for Malaysian believers, whether from Chinese, Tamal or Malay backgrounds, to remain strong in their faith and to resist increasing intimidation. Leaving Islam has severe consequences from society and government and in law.

**SATURDAY 14:** Please pray for the safety of house churches as they become increasingly important for persecuted believers. Pray for local established churches to see the importance of these places and to start supporting them in whatever way they can.

### INDIA

**SUNDAY 15:** Pray for our partner organisation as it provides legal and medical support to pastors across India who are being



*The attacks in Manipur sparked vigils and protests in India*

arrested and beaten simply for sharing the gospel.

**MONDAY 16:** Pray that India's Supreme Court will strike down unconstitutional new laws in several states which ban prayer for healing, evangelism or even meeting together to pray or worship.

**TUESDAY 17:** Pray for the more than 130 pastors in Uttar Pradesh who have been jailed for their faith, on flimsy charges, and are being held pre-trial without bail. Pray that their cases will be heard soon and they will be acquitted.

**WEDNESDAY 18:** Pray for peace in Manipur and across

India's north-eastern region and borders with war-torn Myanmar. Pray that security forces will act with integrity to protect all Indians, including Christians and other minorities.

**THURSDAY 19:** Pray for the thousands of Christians displaced from Manipur who have had to start life again, learn new languages and find new schools and jobs. Pray that they will be made welcome and can access the services they need.

**FRIDAY 20:** Pray for Indians receiving Bibles in their own languages through our partner. Pray for protection

for those printing and distributing these copies, and that God will make his truth known to all who read them.

**SATURDAY 21:** Pray for all those who are standing up for the civil liberties of all Indians and not just the Hindu majority. May God give them courage, protection and wisdom and amplify their voice.

## MYANMAR

**SUNDAY 22:** Pray for the complicated political situation in Myanmar. The widespread, long-running civil war directly affects

Christians when they are targeted for attack by the warring factions. Pray for churches as they navigate political instability and uncertainty.

**MONDAY 23:** Buddhist monks have actively opposed new Christian converts and evangelists. Pastors face arrest and are usually detained for a few days at a time. Pray that church leaders would receive God-given wisdom on how to respond when they are questioned.

**TUESDAY 24:** Villagers with animistic beliefs take vengeance on Christians, claiming they are angering the local spirits. Within tribal groups, families oppose conversion, and new believers are subject to close government monitoring. Pray that all those who have come to faith in Christ will stand strong despite the pressure.

**WEDNESDAY 25:** Pray for the frontline workers Release International supports in Myanmar. We provide them with practical tools to assist their bold evangelism in remote areas where Christians face persecution.

Sources: International Christian Concern; Morning Star News; Release International partners and contacts; VOM USA.

Some names 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.

**THURSDAY 26:** Give thanks for the 'Thura' family. Although they were rejected by their village and extended family they continue to follow Christ. Our partners helped this family to buy land, build a house, and provide for themselves. Pray that others will see the difference God has made in their lives.

**FRIDAY 27:** Pray for the 'Kyaw' family. After being rejected and persecuted because of their faith in Christ, our partners provided them with food support including goats to rear. The family are now thriving and their commitment to Christ and the church has been strengthened.

**SATURDAY 28:** Pray that believers in Myanmar would have access to the word of God. Bibles can be legally purchased in small numbers but they are expensive and unavailable in many regions.

## MOZAMBIQUE

**SUNDAY 29:** Militants persecute Christians in the north of Mozambique, while believers face social and community-wide persecution in other

Muslim-majority areas. Pray for Christians who have lost everything in recent extremist attacks.

**MONDAY 30:** Christians in the northern part of Cabo Delgado province, especially pastors, have suffered greatly under an Islamic insurgency that has also affected many nominal Muslims. In smaller attacks on rural villages, extremists often separate out Christians and their children for extremely inhumane treatment. Please pray for all those affected by this violence.

*Lord Jesus,*

*Prince of Peace, You came to restore all that is broken. In You, all things are made new.*

*Lord, bring peace to troubled nations; reconcile warring communities; bind up broken hearts.*

*Please fill persecuted Christians with all joy and peace as they trust You so that they 'may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (Romans 15:13).*

*Your kingdom come, Your will be done.*

*Amen*