



mission

catalyst



Resources for Ministers from the BMS General Director

www.bmsworldmission.org/catalyst

November 2004

THIS ISSUE: RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Dear Minister/Leader

I don't think I've experienced religious persecution. The nearest I came was decades ago on a summer job as a student. Everyone was a temp, and the slower we worked meant the longer we were employed. My Christian conscience couldn't let me hide among the filing racks doing nothing like others. That didn't please the lazy mob and a couple of lads pinned me against shelves and warned me to go slow or else. I didn't change my ways and thankfully they didn't carry out their threats.

But experiences like that are flea bites compared to the horrors many endure. In Lebanon an assassin shoots a missionary dead. In Indonesia Christians are hacked to death. In India a missionary father and his sons are burned alive in their car. Dreadful. Inexcusable.

Religious persecution, though, isn't a simple thing (or maybe just gets more complicated the more I think about it!). Forgive me if I phrase a few basic points negatively.

- It's not new. Jesus was persecuted and the history of the Church is drenched in the blood of martyrs.
- It's not unique to Christians. People of other faiths also suffer persecution. Sadly Christians are not exempt from being persecutors.
- It's not only between people of different faiths. For example Baptists have suffered badly in parts of Eastern Europe at the hands of some Orthodox church leaders.
- It's not easy to define. When Muslims in Britain are harassed or attacked is it religious persecution or naked racism?

Whatever religious persecution is not, it is appallingly real for vast numbers of Christians and others. At the least we must pray intelligently for those who suffer in a way none of us may ever experience. Beyond that we must guard carefully how we speak of those of other faiths lest we fuel persecution of those we must love. And we must speak out for freedom of religion, even forms of religion with which we have profound disagreement. That plea for freedom is part of the historic foundation of what makes us Baptists today.

Yours sincerely

Alistair Brown



*Rinaldy Daminik is an Indonesian pastor currently imprisoned on false charges of weapons possession
Photo courtesy of Open Doors*

FACT

About 200 million Christians are suffering persecution, while another 200 to 400 million are facing discrimination in over 40 countries.

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 18

What is religious persecution?

The state of religious freedom around the world is worsening.

The identification of religion with nationalism is becoming more common, notably in countries such as Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. This has led to rising persecution of religious minorities in these countries, especially where religion is seen as a threat to the state.

Persecution tends to pass through three phases. The first is disinformation, which normally begins in the media. Religious minorities are often accused of false crimes and their reputations tarnished.

The next phase is discrimination, a consequence of the public opinion resulting from disinformation. Members of the persecuted religion often become second class citizens with inferior legal, social, political and economic rights than the majority of citizens.

The third stage is persecution which can be subtle or overt, and takes place often without penalty for the persecutors or protection for the persecuted. Persecution can come from the state, the police, the military, extremist organisations, mobs, paramilitary groups or religious zealots.



Indonesian church destroyed during recent religious conflict Photo courtesy of Open Doors

Persecution issues

Anti-conversion/anti-proselytisation laws

Over the last several years there has been a rise in the introduction of anti-conversion laws and laws banning proselytisation in several states. Restricting people from changing their religion is a clear violation of human rights as set out by the United Nations.

Laws prohibiting proselytisation are particularly concerning for many Christians, who regard sharing the gospel as an integral part of their faith.

Recently in Sri Lanka the 'Prevention of Forcible Conversions of Religions' bill was presented to

the government by Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a party made up entirely of Buddhist monks opposed to the possible loss of Sri Lanka's Buddhist identity. The bill failed to become law earlier this year, but if it had been passed it would have the potential to seriously limit and prohibit the work of Christian development agencies. Another bill has also been proposed by the Sri Lankan Ministry for Buddhist Affairs which could have a more serious impact on Christian workers if passed. The 'Act of Safeguarding Religious Freedom' bill would prohibit the conversion from one religion to another.

Protection of clergy and churches

In many countries where Christians are persecuted, clergy – the most visible members of religious minorities – are targeted in particular. It is generally perceived that if the leadership of a church is imprisoned or threatened into silence, other Christians will ultimately lose their faith.

Many countries also do not allow the construction of places of worship, and churches are often destroyed.



Church service in Sri Lanka

Persecution of the early Christians – Polycarp

Polycarp was born around 70AD and was appointed pastor of the Church of Smyrna by the apostle John. Persecution of Christians in Rome was commonplace from 161-180 AD, and for many years Polycarp was spared death. In the later years of his ministry, Polycarp had a dream that he would be burned at the stake. Three days later he was found by Roman soldiers and instead of resisting arrest he greeted them and offered them food.

He refused to bow down to Caesar, instead declaring "eighty and six years have I now served Christ, and he has never done me the least wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"

Polycarp refused to be nailed to the stake saying "let me alone as I am: for he who has given me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to stand without moving in the pile." Polycarp prayed before the fire was lit. The flames formed an arch around Polycarp instead of burning him, until eventually the executioner killed him with a sword. So much blood flowed from the wound that the fire was extinguished. The flame was rekindled and Polycarp's body was burned to ashes.

Sources: 1) *The Epistles of St. Ignatius;*
2) *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippian;*
3) *the letter of the Smyrnaeans.*

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

Bible reflection

Many of the Bible's examples of religious persecution aren't easily separated from political persecution. Oppression of Israel was often to keep the people weak and subdued. Jesus suffered because powerful people wanted to stay powerful. His first followers were a definite threat to the status quo. Religion taken seriously disrupts, hence resistance and opposition.

The Bible therefore teaches suffering as normal for Christians. "In this world you will have trouble," Jesus told his disciples. (John 16: 33) And he taught that his followers could expect treatment no more favourable than that given him. "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15: 20) It was no surprise then when trouble came to the first Christians. But they didn't abandon their faith nor even pray for the persecution to stop. All they asked for was boldness still to witness. (Acts 4: 23-30) No surprise then that Paul can give a long list of hardships (2 Cor 11: 21-29) or the writer of Hebrews includes the persecuted in his catalogue of those who showed faith (Heb 11: 32-38). Suffering is part of normal Christianity.

Love and forgiveness must characterise how Christians react



In November 2002, 27 Christian families were forced to flee their homes in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas
Photo courtesy of Open Doors

to persecution. That was Jesus' model: "Father, forgive them..." he prayed on the cross. (Luke 23: 34) It was also his teaching: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matt 5: 44) And it was the teaching of the early church: "Bless those who persecute you... Do not repay anyone evil for evil." (Rom 12: 14-21)

Persecution was not to be invited but also not viewed as a disaster. Providing hardship was for the right reasons (not as a wrongdoer) Christians could rejoice that they were participating in the sufferings of Christ. (1 Pet 4: 12-19) Paul saw his sufferings as completing Christ's afflictions. (Col 1: 24) And Jesus taught a great reward: "Blessed are

those who are persecuted ... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5: 10-12) The promise and comfort is that those who are faithful through great tribulation will share heaven and its joys forever. (Rev 7: 9-17)

FACT

During the last 2,000 years there have been close to 40 million Christian 'martyrs', two-thirds of whom died in the 20th century (this takes a very broad sense of the word martyr and the recent toll is accounted for particularly by Nazism, communism, and racial and tribal conflicts).

Pakistan

(Main source: Release International)

Pakistan has a population of 146.5 million, of which three million are Christian. Christians and other religious minority groups have been victimised by the blasphemy laws and Hudood Ordinances. These vaguely-worded laws mean that blaspheming the prophet Mohammed is an offence punishable by death, but fail to adequately define blasphemy and contain no safeguards against false accusations. As a result of international pressure it was announced on 8 July 2004 that these laws will be revised. This move comes after the recent killings of several Christians.

'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger of sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.'

Romans 8: 35, 38

Iraq

(Main source: The Guardian)

Persecution of Iraq's Christian minority has increased since the end of the Iraq war and the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime. Under Saddam Hussein, Christians were relatively free to practise their religion but now many Christian families have fled the country fearing for their lives.

In August this year a series of co-ordinated car-bomb attacks on churches in Iraq claimed the lives of 12 people and injured more than 60 others.

The attacks took place in Baghdad and the northern city of Mosul and are thought to be the first deliberately aimed at Iraq's approximately 750,000 Christians during the 15-month-old insurgency. Five churches were targeted: one Armenian church, two Assyrian Catholic churches and two Chaldean churches.

Top ten worst persecuting countries in the world

1 North Korea

About 100,000 of North Korea's estimated 500,000 Christians are imprisoned for their faith. All religion is outlawed except the 'worship' of the Eternal President Kim Il Sung (who died in 1994 but is still officially the head of state). The Christian population of North Korea is thought to be three times that of 1970.

2 Saudi Arabia

Christians and other non-Muslim religious groups are not allowed to meet for public worship. Christians cannot hold any position of authority over Muslims.

3 Laos

In 2003 many Christians were arrested and imprisoned, and several churches were closed. One Lao believer was killed for his faith.

4 Vietnam

Tribal Christians in the Highlands of Vietnam continued to suffer persecution over the last year, and the Communist Party announced a decision to take harsh measures to better control religion. The government of Vietnam continues to consistently deny well-documented incidents of religious persecution.

5 Iran

Religious minorities in the country are regularly harassed, intimidated and discriminated against because of their faith.

6 Turkmenistan

After an assassination attempt in 2002 on President Niyazov, the government increased control and the situation for Christians worsened. Many believers have been harassed, threatened, fined and detained because of their faith.

7 Maldives

The official state religion is Islam and all citizens are required to be Muslim. The public practice of any other religion is illegal. If citizens are discovered to be Christian, they will lose their citizenship – the small number of indigenous believers live their faith in isolation and fear.

8 Bhutan

The official state religion is Buddhism and followers are favoured over adherents of other religions. Christians suffer harassment and discrimination by the government, local authorities and other citizens. All non-Buddhist religious material is banned.

9 Myanmar

There is no constitution or laws to protect religious freedom in Myanmar. Buddhism is the major religion. During 2003 several churches and Christian homes were burned. Among ethnic tribes such as the Karen, persecution is more severe.

10 China

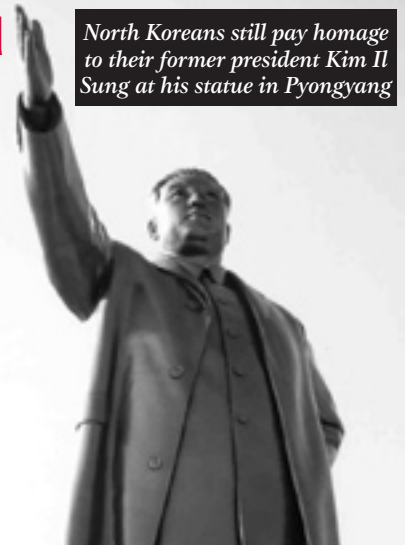
Unregistered religious groups are illegal, and registered churches are controlled and regulated to prevent the rise of groups outside of state control. Despite this, membership of many Christian groups is growing.

Information taken from Open Doors' World Watch List, January 2004

FACT

There have been more Christians killed in the 20th century than in the previous 19 centuries combined.

North Koreans still pay homage to their former president Kim Il Sung at his statue in Pyongyang



Sources and websites

www.opendoorsuk.org

Open Doors. Serving persecuted Christians worldwide. Contains news and campaign information.

www.csw.org.uk

Christian Solidarity Worldwide. Human rights charity working on behalf of persecuted Christians and promoting religious liberty for all.

www.persecution.org

International Christian Concern. Supports the victims of persecution and provides training for underground pastors.

www.religioustolerance.org

Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance. This site promotes religious freedom, tolerance, and diversity as positive cultural values.

www.releaseinternational.org

Release International. Contains news and campaigns, as well as a PDF version of the bi-monthly magazine *Witness*.

www.amnesty.org.uk

Home page of human rights organisation Amnesty International.

www.worldevangelical.org

Home page of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). The WEA includes the Religious Liberty Committee who produced the Geneva report 2004, downloadable from the website.

Compiled by the General Director and Researcher Emma Pulley

For extra resources, information, and PDF versions of Mission Catalyst, please visit www.bmsworldmission.org/catalyst