

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

APR-JUN 2023

voice

of Persecuted Christians

**“OUT OF
THESE ASHES”**
CHRISTIAN
PERSECUTION
IN NIGERIA

**HELPING
THE FAMILIES
OF CHRISTIAN
MARTYRS**

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



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

Are you
inspired
by your
persecuted
family?

In this edition of *Voice* magazine, we launch our UK-wide Nigeria church resources, as we dedicate three months, April to June, to feature the lives of faithful Christians there.

I recently returned from a ministry trip in Nigeria where I had the great privilege of meeting many persecuted Christians; brothers and sisters who live in and around the north, northeast, and central areas. They are facing a continued, huge assault on their lives for being Christians, many of them in constant danger as they remain faithful in prayer and to the gospel.

I listened to our partners, Mark Lipdo of Stefanos Foundation, and Archbishop Ben Kwashi, as they described what they feel to be a 'jihad'; a sustained, planned and direct attack from Islamic extremists specifically aimed at Christians. It was very easy for me to agree with them as I stood alongside, and prayed with, people whose homes have been burned down, whose bodies have been wounded by machetes, and whose loved ones have been killed by the attackers. As you read the stories of the Nigerian Christians I met, please join with Release International, and use our resources – in your church, and among your family and friends – to raise the voice of Nigerian believers being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ.

As you are moved by their stories be *inspired*

by their faith also. I had the privilege of preaching in one small village church which had been damaged by fire in an attack. Our team had expected a few dozen locals to attend the service so you can imagine my surprise when I stood up to speak and saw about 500 people all staring at me expectantly. I hope my message encouraged them as much as they encouraged me simply by being there to worship God after suffering such immense trauma. If you ever needed proof of the power of the gospel, here it was: believers who had lost everything yet were still coming to church to praise their Saviour!

BEING THANKFUL

Equally inspiring is the story of our sister Fenny from Indonesia (see page 14) who suffered horrendous injuries in a bomb explosion at her church and yet has forgiven her attackers, and even met with former terrorists. *'I did not want revenge because I know God had a plan. I never felt bitterness towards them,'* she said.

We also hear from church leaders who describe life for Christians under occupation in Ukraine (see page 16). At the end of the feature one villager tells a pastor: *'We have no shops, no chemist, no water, but I praise Jesus that he has protected my house.'* The pastor says: *'They have taught me how to be thankful.'*

Wow! What a family we belong to!

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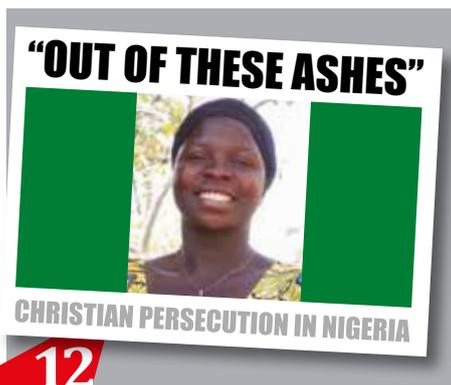
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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

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.

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FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR

Faith under fire

Indian police target Christians

Reliable Christian sources in India have spoken directly to Release International about the increasing violence and attacks on the church there, which are being attributed to anti-conversion laws. Reports include a number of recorded incidents of mob attacks on Christians and Christian churches or institutions. We have seen witness statements evidencing state police brutality. The police have made many unlawful arrests and have been complicit in torture against Christians held in custody.

Our contact told us: *'I travel a lot around the Hindi-speaking churches in the north of India. I have just received another report that Broadwell Christian hospital in Fatehpur [in Uttar Pradesh] has been targeted for harassment by the local police and they have brought many false charges against doctors and nurses there. The police walked into the labour room and threatened the doctors and mothers. It is a horrendous experience for the women. A local fringe group has been printing pamphlets saying that Christians are illegally converting people which is completely untrue. It is a frightening experience to go to church. The police have also stopped Christians entering churches. We have asked people to be very cautious. We need a lot of prayer as conversion is freely given and we continue to proclaim the gospel.'*

Remembering Raymond Koh



February 13 marked the sixth anniversary of the disappearance of Malaysian pastor Raymond Koh (pictured). A lawsuit to disclose his whereabouts brought by his wife, Susanna, against the police and Government, was due to be heard in December. It is now expected in June.

Raymond was abducted in broad daylight on the streets of Malaysia in a military-style operation that was captured on CCTV. Responsibility has been laid at the door of the Malaysian Special Branch.

Susanna told Release International:

'Sometimes it is difficult to understand what is going on but I believe God's timing is the best timing. Even though it is disappointing and just prolonging the family's agony of not knowing what happened to Raymond, we surrender everything into His hands. Whatever happens, happens for a reason and we want to be in God's perfect will. He knows best.'

Please pray that the truth of Raymond's whereabouts will be made known. A petition calling for his release can be signed at www.releaseraymond.com.

Politician supports Mayflower Church

A prominent American politician has called for the resettlement of Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church, also known as the Mayflower Church.

US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul published a letter sent to Department of State officials calling for US intervention for the 64 Chinese Christians applying for UN refugee status in Thailand. In the letter Mr McCaul wrote: *'The United States must intervene to help ensure the safety of the group, protect them against refoulement [the forcible return of refugees or asylum seekers to a country where they are liable to be subjected to persecution] and continued harassment by the PRC [People's Republic of China], and support their prompt assessment for protection as refugees, including consideration by the United States Refugee Admission Program.'*

Beginning in late 2019, 28 adults and 32 children from Shenzhen Holy Reformed left their homes in China and travelled to South Korea to seek asylum after years of persecution at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party. After exhausting the immigration system in South Korea and receiving continuous threats from the Chinese Government, the group moved to Thailand last autumn. Now numbering 64, they had hoped to secure refugee status through the UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, but remain at risk of refoulement or kidnapping as the Chinese Government continually harasses the group and threatens their family members in China.

Advocates call the exiled Christians the 'Mayflower Church' in reference to the English pilgrims who set out to find religious freedom after experiencing persecution in the 17th century.

Listen to our latest podcasts



BRINGING HOPE The last couple of years have seen a series of civil protests in Iran. These have been prompted by an economic crisis but also by a lack of freedom of expression and violation of women's rights. Within that context Christians continue to suffer persecution for an active faith and witness. In this edition of the Voice podcast we speak to Simon, from our partners Transform Iran. He explains some of the background to the current climate in Iran and how the gospel continues to provide hope in the midst of despair. Simon also provides an update on the welfare of several Iranian churches in Turkey in the light of the recent earthquakes.

TWEN: IMPRISONED FOR FAITH; SUSTAINED BY GRACE Twen had been a Christian for only two years when she was arrested and imprisoned in Eritrea at the age of 21. She had no idea she would spend the next 16 years locked away in the Eritrean prison system for choosing to follow Jesus. Over the years she suffered intense persecution, but by the grace of God, she survived violent beatings, isolation in scorching-hot shipping containers, deprivation of water and food, and even being thrown into a pit of poisonous snakes. Hear from her now on this episode of the Voice podcast as we had the privilege of speaking to Twen after she was released from prison.

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2023 Following the recent publication of Release International's Persecution Trends report for 2023, which highlights the pressures Christians are likely to face in several key areas over the year, we are speaking to the CEOs of three of our sister ministries. Hear from Cole Richards of Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) USA, Tony Benjamin of VOM Australia and Floyd Brobbel of VOM Canada. Listen in as we discuss some of the key areas where persecution is expected to rise this year, as well as how this information can help all of us and our churches to be better informed, and to pray. You can read the Persecution Trends report in our January Voice magazine or on our website.

Sign up to Release



Militants have attacked buses and killed passengers

Evangelicals trapped in besieged city

Jihadist attacks in Burkina Faso are multiplying, causing many civilians to become internally displaced persons (IDPs). Among the 1.8 million IDPs in the country, 75,000 are believed to be evangelical Christians.

Our partner Dr Susanna (not her real name) said the situation in the country was worsening with jihadist attacks taking place simultaneously in different areas.

She said: *'The 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. In one of the recent attacks, they looked for the families of people helping the Government. As the village refused to hand over those families, they started killing people, and more than 12 lost their lives. Other places are depopulated, as all inhabitants decided to move to nearby towns, the so-called safe towns.'*

At the time of writing one city in the east of the country was believed to have been completely encircled by jihadists. Dr Susanna said some people were able to escape before it was completely closed off. However, 12,000 IDPs are inside the city, including about 600 evangelical believers. *'This number does not include local Christians who lived there in the past. They decided to stay as the city used to be safe. Now, all of them are inside. Jihadists continue their attacks around the city and in its suburbs. They destroy schools, houses, and local markets and chase away or kill people. Christians are still able to gather for prayer/Bible reading only in the very city centre. Their situation is critical. Our contacts stay connected with them and encourage them by phone calls.'*

She said the attacks on the roads were also continuing. In a recent incident, jihadists stopped two public buses, before killing all the male passengers and burning the vehicles.

Dr Susanna added: *'The military government is trying to do something, but they cannot do so, as around 75 per cent of the area is out of their control, and they haven't been able to stop the supplies for jihadists.'*

NIIGERIA



Esther's message to the militants who killed her close relatives is: 'I forgive you.'

A glorious church rising from the ashes of persecution

A Release International fact-finding team recently returned from Nigeria, where reports suggest more Christians are being killed for their faith than in the rest of the world put together. Yet what we discovered is not a church in despair but one that is overcoming through love and forgiveness, even towards those who have 'betrayed' it, writes Andrew Boyd

It was just before Christmas in Mallagum village, Kaduna state. But the festive spirit had been dampened by rumours that Fulani militants were about to stage an attack.

Heavily armed Fulani militia had already attacked two other villages nearby, killing and injuring the mainly Christian residents and burning their homes.

The people of Mallagum did not know whether to stay put or to run for their lives. But many of them took reassurance when soldiers turned up in their military vehicles, as Esther Nathan recalls: *'Every day they were around, going up and down in our village, and the people said, "They're going to save us." We were very happy.'*

These soldiers said they were hungry, so the villagers gave them food. One was sick and the villagers helped him.

The villagers had been planning to take the children to a nearby hospital just in case the Fulani came. But the soldiers said, *'No, don't go anywhere. Just relax. Nothing will happen to you. We are here to protect you.'*

Esther was relieved. Perhaps now they could settle down to prepare for Christmas.

But at 10am on Sunday, December 18, the villagers realised they had been betrayed. The Fulani attacked. And far from protecting them, the men wearing the uniforms of soldiers joined in the shooting.

'They were together,' said Esther. *'They were mixing.'*

More men arrived dressed in military fatigues, but far from rescuing the villagers, they joined in with the

Fulani. *'They burned our houses – everything. They were working together.'*

According to Esther, the soldiers and Fulani together killed 29 people in her village. Their victims included Esther's father- and mother-in-law and their adopted 11-yr-old son, Nehemiah Sunday.

'They shot my father-in-law, Toma, and then they cut him with a knife – his leg and hands.'

Toma was 80 and too old to run. His wife, Jummai, was 60.

Esther believes Toma was already dead when his killers set about his body. She cannot imagine why anyone would do such a thing.

However, others have described similar attacks, where Fulani militants have mutilated the bodies of those they have killed as a grim warning to the Christian villagers to run for their lives and never return.

Even so, many of the villagers chose to cling to their homes. So the Fulani returned soon after to drive home their brutal message.

Attack victim Lukuchi David told Arise News: *'The gunshots were everywhere. You didn't know where to run.'*

'Everybody ran,' said Esther. *'And they burned our houses again.'*

'They killed so many people, and the Government didn't take any action,' said Joel Victor, another villager.

Finally, more soldiers arrived, and this time it was to protect the villagers. The Fulani headed out, leaving blackened walls, twisted roofs, and

the bodies of the dead among the ashes.

By then, according to press reports, this Fulani raid had killed 39 people in several villages in southern Kaduna.

The villagers buried their dead in a mass grave three days before Christmas, to the sound of wailing.

As Channels TV reported: *'The arrival of the truck carrying the victims' caskets triggered an outpouring of emotions as relatives and friends wept helplessly.'*

As the coffins were unloaded and placed in a long line, mourners prostrated themselves over the

'The military, the police, the government have all failed us'

caskets containing their loved ones, grieving their lost and crying out for justice.

'Hundreds who gathered for the funeral called on the Government and security agencies to stop the attacks before they are completely wiped out,' reported Channels TV.

The Catholic Bishop of Kanfanchan Diocese, Kaduna, told another Nigerian TV channel, Arise News: *'The military have failed us, the police have failed us, the Government have failed us.'* The bishop's own house was destroyed in the attack.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) described the raid on unsuspecting villagers as 'barbaric' and a strategy to drive them off their lands.

'The Federal Government and security agencies must not let the killers escape,' said CAN state chairman Joseph Hayab. *'Those who commit this evil must be arrested and brought to face justice.'*

And a statement by the South Kaduna Peoples' Union described the attacks as 'crimes against humanity'.

It condemned the security forces for failing to protect the villagers: *'Let it be put on the record that in*

Continued overleaf..

"OUT OF THESE ASHES"



CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION IN NIGERIA

MAJOR CAMPAIGN

The worsening persecution of Christians in Nigeria is the major focus of Release International this spring.

Inspired by words from Archbishop Ben Kwashi, we are launching a campaign called *Out of these Ashes*, informing UK Christians of the scale and severity of the violence against our brothers and sisters in Nigeria.

We want to encourage people to pray for all those suffering for Christ in this significant country that has been described as the cornerstone of the continent of Africa.

The campaign will be launched with a special online event on April 4.

If you would like to register and be part of that event, details are available on the Release International website.

The campaign will conclude with a speaker tour around the UK (see page 20), finishing with a special Day of the Christian Martyr event on June 29.

See page 12

See enclosed *Prayer Shield*



the hundreds of attacks that have left many parts of southern Kaduna in ruins and killed thousands since 2014, we have not seen anyone arrested and brought to book.'

But from what Esther witnessed, the problem runs far deeper.

In her view, it is not simply that security forces failed to protect the villagers. Nor that they turned a blind eye to the slaughter.

It is Esther's conviction that soldiers actually joined in the attack, having reassured the villagers it was safe to remain.

Others from different villages, in different states, which were attacked on different occasions, have made similar allegations. Release International will report their witness accounts in the weeks and months to come.

In Mallagum village, what Esther saw with her own eyes convinced her that these men were soldiers. She and the other villagers were persuaded by their assurances that they would protect them.

'They were wearing green uniforms,' she says. And they looked like regular soldiers carrying regular weapons. And while the Fulani attackers were speaking their own language, Esther says these apparent soldiers spoke English. And they arrived in armoured cars.

This description alone cannot be considered proof of military collusion. But such allegations must be investigated.

If these uniformed men were Fulani militants in disguise, where did they get their military equipment? And if they were regular soldiers, how is it possible that Nigerian troops could be permitted to support an attack against defenceless villagers?

Humanitarian crisis

Esther's husband lost his parents, and together they lost their home. They had to leave what remains of their village and have now joined the estimated three million Nigerians displaced by the violence, according to the UN Refugee Agency.

Release International's partners give warning that unless urgent and decisive action is taken to protect ordinary Nigerians many more could be forced to flee. They fear this could provoke a humanitarian crisis that would impact not only the region, but the rest of the world.

Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa, and according to the UN is projected to overtake the US by around 2050 – trailing only China and India.

It is hard to overestimate Nigeria's importance in Africa, and the scale of the violence unfolding in that country.

Successive reports state that more Christians are killed for their faith each year in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world. And in recent years, more Christians are killed in Nigeria than in the rest of the world put together.

That violence, instigated by Islamist terror groups, Fulani militants and kidnap gangs is spreading.

Unless an end is put to the bloodshed, there will be a wholesale exodus of Nigerian Christians, believes Release International partner, the Anglican Archbishop of Jos, the Most Reverend Dr Benjamin Kwashi.

He said: *'Christians are going to leave this country. They're going to leave in droves. Christians are going to run to anywhere in the world, but Nigeria. They will not wait for the persecution that will happen.'*

And that means this is not just Nigeria's problem, but the world's.

Overcoming faith

Esther's faith, and the faith of many displaced Christians interviewed recently by Release International is humbling and remarkable.

We spoke to Esther at a trauma-healing workshop in Plateau State, organised by one of our Nigerian partners. The workshop was held close to another village which had been attacked by the Fulani.

There, too, Fulani militants had swept in and set fire to everything they could, while the villagers ran for their lives.

And this village was right next to a large military barracks. Not a single soldier came out to help them.

But Esther, and every Christian we spoke to – without exception – had this simple but profound message: ‘We forgive them’.

Esther is a member of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA), one of the largest Christian denominations in Nigeria, which faithfully continues to plant churches even in these troubled parts of the country.

As fast as the Fulani militants burn their churches down, they build another.

So, if Esther could say anything to those who destroyed their homes and slaughtered her father- and mother-in-law, what would it be?

‘I would say, I forgive them. I would ask them to repent,’ she said. *‘Our Bible does not tell us to kill someone like this. It is a sin. The only thing is to forgive them.’*

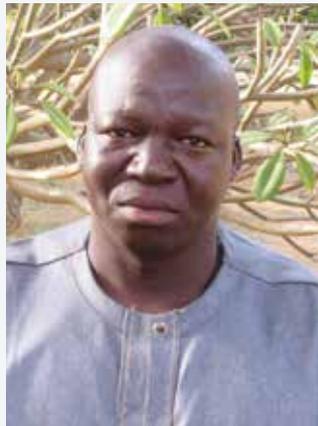
Esther learned this message of grace from her father-in-law, Toma, who was murdered by the Fulani. She was very close to Toma. *‘He used to tell me that if anyone does something bad to you, find a way to forgive that person. Once you have that heart of forgiveness, you will live.’*

‘Even if my father- and mother-in-law were alive today, they would say that they forgive these Fulani men, because they didn’t know what they were doing.’

Throughout this harrowing time Esther has found encouragement from one scripture in particular, Psalm 101. ‘I will sing of your love and justice; to you, Lord, I will sing praise. I will be careful to lead a

NIGERIA is the focus of our new campaign, *Out of these Ashes*, which aims to raise awareness and prayer for our suffering brothers and sisters in Africa’s most populous nation. Page 12

KIDNAPPED PASTOR HOLDS NO HATRED



What challenges you the most when talking to Christians in Nigeria who have suffered a traumatic event is just how ready they are to forgive the perpetrators. They may have lost family members, even their own spouse or children, been seriously injured or kidnapped or just plain traumatised through seeing some horrendous slaughter in their community – but they hold no bitterness. It challenges me. How would I respond if faced with a similar situation? How would our churches react if attacked?

One such man who personifies this attitude is Pastor ‘Monday’ (pictured) who despite having been abducted at gunpoint told me he held no hatred towards his kidnapers.

I encountered Pastor Monday, who is aged 43, at a trauma-healing workshop run by our partners in Plateau state. Militant Fulani herdsmen had attacked his community, stealing cattle, burning down the church and killing four members of the congregation before kidnapping the pastor at gunpoint – later demanding not one, but two ransoms from his congregation for his release.

Pastor Monday was deeply traumatised by the whole experience but despite the terrible events he and his congregation had suffered, they were rebuilding their lives.

He told me: ‘As Christians, and based on the teachings of the Bible, we need to forgive our attackers and pray that God will touch their lives so they will know what they are doing is wrong – and repent.’

Such believers are an inspiration and provide hope for the future of their country as well as the church within it. Thank God for them.

Alex Smythe

blameless life – when will you come to me?’

This Psalm has a particular message for Esther: *‘That we should stand by our faith, no matter the situation. That we should give thanks to God no matter the situation. No matter what has happened to us, we still appreciate the word of God over our lives.’*

Even as the homeless gathered at the mission station with its painted halls and neatly trimmed hedges, the Fulani militants were continuing their attacks in Kaduna. *‘They came again only the day before yesterday,’* said Esther.

‘These Fulani, they are still in our

villages. And now they say they are in government, so no one will stop them. They say they are going to deal with us.’

Esther asks for prayer from Release International supporters: *‘We pray for peace for our country, especially Kaduna state. Without peace, we cannot do anything. But once you have peace, you can do what you want.’*

And Esther, who is 35, asked specifically for prayer for herself. *‘I have this challenge. I am childless. For the last three years I have had fibroids. There is no solution. So I need God’s intervention. Please pray for me for healing.’*



Release International CEO Paul Robinson prays with the Tagwi family

In the footsteps of a martyr

The Bible tells us that what an enemy intends for harm, God is able to turn to good (Genesis 50:20-21). And we can bring an encouraging update on the story of Rose Tagwi.

Rose's husband Matthew had been serving as a pastor near Miango in Plateau State, when he was searched out by Fulani militants and shot dead.

Rose, who is aged 27, was later able to pray that Matthew's killers would come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. *'Nothing will stop the gospel of Christ,'* she said. *'I forgive them and pray that the Lord will save their souls.'*

Life has been hard for this widow, who was left with three children with



Rose Tagwi

another on the way. And it became harder still when her baby, Patience, died soon after she was born.

Our partners have been able to help Rose with counselling and support. And on our recent trip, our UK team were able to meet Rose in person to provide further encouragement.

We were also able to meet the mother and younger brother of Rose's husband Matthew, who was murdered

by Fulani militants. Daniel and Azumi Tagwi spoke of the difficulties they had gone through. As the team prayed for them, Daniel broke down in tears.

But Daniel, who is 27, is now following in his martyred brother's footsteps. Despite his personal loss, Daniel remains committed to the Lord and is training for the ministry. Come what may, he is determined to become a pastor, too.

Seven other members of this community that came under brutal attack are doing the same. In the words attributed to church father Tertullian: 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.'

'What the devil meant for harm, God is turning for good,' says Release International CEO Paul Robinson. *'Our prayer is that something of the kingdom will come from this tragic situation, that out of these ashes can come hope and revival.'*

'After we prayed for Azumi, she was able to smile and respond with faith. "The future," she told us "is in God's hands."

HOW TO PRAY FOR NIGERIA

- Pray for an end to the violence against Christians that has ravaged northern Nigeria and beyond for many years
- Pray for protection for vulnerable communities and Release International partners who risk their lives to help the persecuted
- That the bereaved and traumatised would find healing and hope as they attend workshops held by our partners
- That corrupt officials in the Government and security forces would be rooted out
- That God would convict the terrorists of their sin and open their eyes to the truth of the gospel
- For the success of our campaign in raising awareness and prayer in the church in the UK and Ireland

For the love of humanity

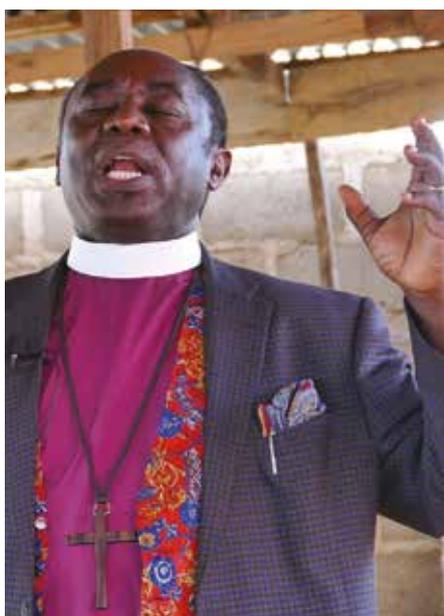
God is bringing beauty out of these ashes of destruction, believes Release International partner Ben Kwashi, the Archbishop of Jos.

But the price is high. The toll the violence is taking on church leaders as well as ordinary Christians is formidable.

'I've done far more funerals in the last 20 years than naming ceremonies or weddings put together,' said Archbishop Ben. *'I'm a grieving pastor.'*

'I have a church on Bauchi Road which has been destroyed four times. I have rebuilt it four times, and I will rebuild it ten times. Because I will never abandon those people.'

'And all this is happening under the nose of the federal Government in Nigeria. There seems to be no hope for justice for the Church in the north and northeast.'



Archbishop Ben Kwashi believes God is bringing beauty out of the ashes of destruction

'What the persecutors are bringing is destruction. They're bringing illiteracy, they're bringing people back to the days when they are helpless, and disease will kill them.'

'But we have a gospel that is not only able to save life but bring civility to

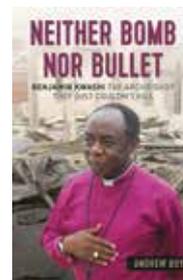
humanity; that brings kindness and introduces health care, and mostly for free.

'Those who bring this gospel have chosen to be transformers in this life, going about the real business of change and transformation in communities where people consider their governments have forgotten them.'

'Their motive is whatever will count in eternity, whatever will count before the Lord. This kind of love is unusual. It is selfless. And they do it for the love of humanity.'

'In all this God is at work, bringing out of these ashes – literally – his beauty and his glory in the lives of His people.'

Archbishop Benjamin Kwashi tells his story in his biography *Neither Bomb Nor Bullet*, which is available on the Release International website.



Please help families of martyrs around the world

These precious believers need your prayers and gifts to survive – and rebuild their lives.

Your gift could:

- Support trauma-healing workshops
- Provide food and other essentials for survivors of attacks
- Provide direct support to widows and orphans

To make a gift please use the enclosed form, call 01689 823491 or give online at releaseinternational.org



Nearly 300 schoolgirls were abducted in Chibok in northeast Nigeria in 2014

OUT OF THESE ASHES

For the past two decades Christians in northern and central Nigeria have endured horrendous persecution. Thousands have been killed and many more forced to flee, as Islamist extremists have waged a brutal campaign of terror. While some in the West label the situation as 'sectarian conflict', Christian leaders who are living and ministering in the midst of this violence are clear that this is a deliberate campaign against Christians and the Church. In response to this relentless persecution Release International's Out of these Ashes campaign is seeking to bring this situation to the attention of Christians in the UK and to call for a renewed commitment to prayer. Here two of our partners, Archbishop Ben Kwashi of Jos and Mark Lipdo of Stefanos Foundation, explain the roots of the persecution and reflect on the current situation



BEN KWASHI

The persecution of Christians has been a significant part of Nigeria's history. By the time of Independence in 1960, the religious fault lines between Islam and other religions, especially Christianity, were already deep. The Usman Dan Fodio jihad of the 1800s had spread across parts of the north west to the central regions where the Jihadists



were resisted. Christianity, however, was accepted and became the dominant religion in the central region long before the country's independence. The gospel had been first brought to the Bauchi/Jos Plateau area as far back as 1906.

The subsequent history of Nigeria is complex as political and religious factors intertwined, often with disastrous effect. Despite a nominally secular constitution, the religious divide has become more pronounced and several northern states, starting with Zamfara, have instituted *Sharia* (Islamic law) from the year 2000. Resistance to the law by Christians resulted in riots and the killing of hundreds of Christians and the destruction of many churches.

This set the stage for the many tragedies that followed. Radical Muslim gangs attacked and killed Christians under the pretext of blasphemy in Kano, Kaduna, Zaria, Gombe, Bauchi and many northern towns. Boko Haram, in its first online propaganda video, called for a *jihad* against the 'infidels' of Jos, central Nigeria. The group then launched its terrorism campaign against democracy and anything associated with Christianity, primarily 'western education' which, it claimed, was adulterating Islam and turning Muslims into infidels. Boko Haram therefore attacked and destroyed dozens of schools and kidnapped students. In 2014 nearly 300 schoolgirls were abducted in Chibok, in north-eastern Nigeria, and there have been other similar attacks since then. The Islamic terrorist group grew in influence and violence, deploying suicide bombers and attacking churches and predominantly Christian communities. It also attacked any moderate Muslim who showed any sympathy for Christians.

Radical Islamic Fulani herdsmen militia groups, associated with Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa and al-Qaida, also started their campaign against Christians in the predominantly central region of Nigeria, destroying more than 150 villages and slaughtering thousands of Christians, surpassing even Boko Haram in the extent of their killing.

All over the north and central regions many churches continue to be targeted and destroyed, thousands of women and girls have been raped and hundreds now live with life-changing injuries and disabilities. The number of orphans, widows and vulnerable persons in IDP (internally displaced persons) camps runs into thousands. Many churches and Christian communities have been forced to pay millions of pounds in ransom to radical Islamist militia, in desperate attempts to secure the freedom of their loved ones who had been kidnapped – men, women and children, including pastors. This subjugates Christians and strategically impoverishes the communities. At least two million children have been deprived of any good education due to the ongoing attacks. The situation is such that today Nigeria is said to be one of the most dangerous countries in which to be a Christian.

It is estimated that since 2009 some 43,000 Christians have been murdered, and 18,500 abducted (never to be seen again and assumed to be dead). During the same time-frame, approximately 17,500 churches and 2,000 Christian schools were torched and destroyed. Such consistent and persistent persecution makes it surprising that in 2021, the US State Department removed Nigeria from its list of Countries of Particular Concern (nations that either engage in, or tolerate, violations of religious freedom)!

The Nigerian Government has been accused of bias in dealing with Christian persecution. It denies, deflects and defends its inability to stop the killings and threatens or arrests its critics. The Government has also found refuge in the globally acceptable narrative that the killings are caused by climate change, as Muslim herders fight Christian farmers

for economic resources, and that the slow extermination has nothing to do with religious persecution. Despite the overwhelming facts of terrorism, the killing of women and children and wiping out of villages, the politically correct narratives insist 'it's more complicated than that', 'Muslims too have been targeted and killed', 'there are not enough facts and documentation to prove that only Christians are targeted' and 'the killings do not yet meet the parameters of genocide'.

There does not seem to be a clear-cut path to unity in the country, and the government institutions that should have tackled the terrorism and provided justice and security have fallen far below expectations. The situation shows no signs of subsiding, especially in the north east, the north west and in the central regions. In January 2023

alone, Muslim extremists slaughtered about 60 Christians, raided churches, and kidnapped women and children. During one of these raids on a church terrorists burned the priest alive and shot and wounded his assistant priest. With the growing number of radical Islamic militia and terrorist groups, this can only mean that the persecution of Christians is likely to continue for a long time until there is a clear acknowledgment of this unfolding tragedy and the political will to stop it.

One thing, however, is certain: We will not deny the Lord or bring disgrace to those first missionaries who gave their all in order to bring Christianity to these shores. We have a gospel worth living for, and a gospel worth dying for!



MARK LIPDO

The current high level of insecurity in Nigeria began as a persecution of Christians in the northern part of the country: an extremist Islamic ideology instigated a jihad (religious war) targeting Christians in the country.

This soon turned ethnic, with high levels of ethnic-cleansing activities and provided grounds for lethal Islamic terrorism. The *jihad* unleashed violence on individuals, villages and communities, displacing millions of Nigerians from their homes and now not even moderate Muslims are spared. However, the Government takes advantage of it to play its political games.

Over the past two decades, Stefanos Foundation, under four successive federal government

rules, has recorded incidences of violence ranging from Islamic rioting to Boko Haram terrorism, and then fully operational militant Fulani herdsmen who have continued to ravage communities, killing, maiming, kidnapping and displacing thousands while occupying some communities. This terrorist activity has encouraged a high level of crime with impunity and has given room for political exploitations that are now affecting the rule of law and good governance in Nigeria.

Stefanos has been working to intervene in the agony, pain and suffering, providing physical care, trauma care and advocating over the disruption that this violence has caused millions of people.

The bias, intolerance, marginalisation and sectional scheming have further deepened the fault lines. This increases the concern over the mass abductions of school students, mass displacement of people, kidnapping for ransom, destruction of farms and a list of emerging Fulani settlements on ethnic farmlands. So far, there are no signs of these ills abating any time soon.

'I feel no bitterness'

After suffering horrendous injuries in a bomb attack, one Indonesian Christian had the opportunity to meet face to face with former terrorists. Her story of recovery and forgiveness is truly inspirational, writes Tom Hardie

When the bomb went off my whole body felt like it was on fire,' she said.

Fenny Suryawati was only five metres away from the explosion that day in May 2018 when suicide bombers targeted her church in Indonesia.

'I was at the front of the church when I heard a vehicle hit the gate. It then exploded three times.'

In fact the vehicle was a minivan packed with explosives. After

ramming the gates the van erupted into a ball of fire, igniting the petrol tanks of cars and motorcycles in the car park and causing multiple secondary explosions.

The initial blast killed two people, and the ensuing flames quickly enveloped the front of the church building, along with Fenny, who was on her way to collect her eight-year-old daughter from Sunday school.

Confused and dazed and suffering extensive burns Fenny cried out for

help. She recalls: *'One church member doused me with water. My clothing had burned and was sticking to me. Part of my face was blackened by the bomb. My face and head had swollen; my vision was cloudy and I could not hear.'*

Because she was so close to the explosion, Fenny's body was locked into a physical position called 'the dragonfly'. Her fingers had also been melded together as a result of the heat from the blast.

Despite her injuries Fenny tried to locate her daughter; to her relief the girl's injuries were minor in comparison.

Both of them were taken to hospital where initially Fenny's survival was uncertain. It was the start of a long journey to recovery that would



Fenny is thankful to be able to share her story; and (inset) in 2019.

take months and involve major and extensive treatment. *'I had 85 per cent burns and had to have morphine to cope with the pain,'* she said. One doctor told her he had never treated someone who survived burns as severe as hers.

In total Fenny received 30 skin grafts as well as surgery to lengthen the space between her fingers. And even after the surgery it was necessary to undergo radiation treatment to kill off malignant cells that had formed in her body.

As well as the challenge of physical recovery Fenny had to cope with the impact on her mental health. *'I felt depressed because I could not do the normal things, like wash myself, clean the house, or even hold a spoon,'* she said.

'I asked God: "Why did it happen?" and "When will the suffering be over?" But at the same time she drew strength from repeating passages of scripture to herself.

In time a worker from a Release International associate ministry called at her house and began to support her in the days following her release from hospital, helping her to receive ongoing medical treatment and rehabilitation. On top of this, the Government provided a level of support to aid her recovery, while separately local Muslims shocked by the attacks on the churches paid her a visit to express their sadness.

In fact on that day, May 13, suicide bombers from the Islamic State terrorist group murdered 15 people at three Indonesian churches, including ten from Fenny's congregation at Surabaya Central Pentecostal Church. Several more were injured.

'I am so happy I can do practical day-to-day tasks again – it's a miracle!'

While the bombing at the Pentecostal church was the most powerful and destructive of those carried out that morning, the carnage could have been much worse. A bomb disposal unit later discovered and defused two additional explosives near the church.

Despite all she has suffered Fenny holds no bitterness towards the attackers. In fact through a government programme to bring about reconciliation and help survivors to overcome their trauma she has even met former terrorists who have repented of their actions.

'I did not want revenge because I know God had a plan. I never felt bitterness towards them,' she said. *'They said they had been indoctrinated and expressed their sorrow for what they had done. If I did [feel bitter], what use is that?'*

She added: *'I am thankful to Jesus, the ministries that helped me and those who prayed for me. I am so happy I can do practical day-to-day tasks again – it's a miracle!'*

Fenny has now returned to her previous job and is even back riding a motorbike again – even if slowly. She is grateful to have regained some of the life she had before the attack.

Surabaya Central Pentecostal Church was closed for repairs but has reopened again with a larger, stronger security gate and new protective barrier at the entrance. The pastor encourages members to stay faithful and keep meeting together.

The bombers may have sought to destroy the church but it continues to gather for worship and to love all those living in its neighbourhood. Fenny's story is testimony to its message of hope.

PRAY

- Thank God for Fenny, for her amazing recovery and inspiring testimony
- Pray that her story of hope and forgiveness would have a lasting impact on many people both in Indonesia and further afield
- Pray for God's protection and blessing on the churches in Indonesia

REMAINING GRACE

I could not help but ask this gentle woman of God how the events in 2018 had affected her faith. After all, it would have been only natural to have questioned God and maybe even to have felt shaken in her beliefs.

'I was a believer before but after the bombing I felt I couldn't serve my family or God any more,' Fenny said.

'However, it meant that I began to understand much more about the grace of God. Even when I couldn't do anything, it was still there – it was not me any more but Him!'

She smiles. *'I understand grace much more now.'*

Tom Hardie

Doing church in a warzone

The conflict in Ukraine has created a hunger for the gospel as well as strengthening the church. Here three pastors, whose identities must be protected, describe life under Russian occupation

'God knows what war means; we didn't,' said Pastor T, whose church continued to operate under occupation after the invasion by Russian troops.

'A city under occupation is not what you think. It is not suddenly full of foreign soldiers; it's just that things like the police and the tax system have changed. The occupiers don't care about you, just their own needs and goals. You still live in your city but

it's not your city any more. Shops are closed; some days people didn't have food, water, electricity, the internet... but we tried to be a church and help people to survive by sharing food, medicines and water.'

Pastor T had to flee his hometown six months after the invasion but while he was there his church became a much-needed resource for Christians and non-believers alike.

'We tried to renew worship services because people were afraid. There was no news, people didn't know what was going on so the church became a place where people could receive support and care.

'When the Russian soldiers said to us, "We set you free", we asked, "From what? Water? Electricity?"'

Every day they came to church because everything else was closed. It became a place where they could open their minds and receive encouragement. We shared with non-believers as well.'

To try to win the hearts and minds



Great opportunities are being created for the gospel in Ukraine. Stock photo

of the local population, the Russians, who knew they were not welcome or liked, tried to appear as the great liberators and the only source of provision – so the church became the chief competition.

‘When the Russian soldiers said to us, “We set you free”, we asked, “From what? Water? Electricity?”’

As well as facing the threat of being robbed by the invaders or being arrested, deported or beaten for showing any pro-Ukrainian sympathies, Christians not belonging to the Russian Orthodox were also at risk. *‘Priests and pastors in some occupied cities were arrested and beaten, even deported from the area, and some were killed,’ said Pastor T.*



Despite the horrors of war, the church has been strengthened. Stock photo

‘Even members of the Ukrainian Orthodox were forbidden.’

While some believers hid their faith, others declared it openly, so being a pastor under occupation threw up a host of new challenges. *‘The church is a place for kindness, softness, mercy and forgiveness but in wartime you need to be strong and make difficult decisions. Sometimes even what may appear cruel decisions such as giving medicines and food to some but not others. At the same time God healed people in their homes. He knows what war means; we didn’t.’*

He added; *‘People are used to having decisions made democratically but war is not a time for discussion. What I say is, “Don’t choose a pastor if you are not going to do what he says during wartime!”’*

Before being forced to leave the city, Pastor T helped many Ukrainians in the Russian-controlled territories to flee the occupation. He believes that the challenge of living under oppression and then becoming refugees will help ministers to be more effective and to help those in need.

‘In the last 200 years there have been no more than 20 or 30 years of freedom for evangelicals in the Ukrainian church. There have been waves of freedom and terror, so it’s not strange for Christians to be persecuted. We accept that persecution can come – it is not punishment. God wants us to be stronger.’

‘And we know how to accept refugees and how to be refugees. We know how to be persecuted. Ukrainians have now experienced church in other western countries so the church in future will be a strong, cross-cultural movement. Borders mean nothing for Christianity. And people in the West now know what a refugee is because they are their neighbours, real people.’

Opportunity amid the tears

Despite running a vibrant church for refugees in another Central European country, Pastor Oleg has returned to the war-torn port city of Odessa on the Black Sea to preach the gospel and minister to the local church and the wider Ukrainian church as a whole.

‘I was not surprised when the war started; I could see from what happened in Georgia in 2008 [the invasion by Russia] how things were developing. Months before the war started we talked in church about what we would do, and I started becoming involved in the evacuation of thousands of orphans.’

He told stories of Christians trying to escape the cities that had come under attack and being beaten and abused by Russians at the borders.

One man, his wife and nine foster children were stopped at a checkpoint. *‘When the guards found out he was a Baptist they made him wait and told him they were waiting for two more men to come. What they*

Continued overleaf...



Oleg has returned to the war-torn city of Odessa to preach the gospel and minister to the church. Stock photo

wanted to do was see if they could kill three men with one bullet.

‘The Ukrainian said that if they killed him, they would be killing his whole family as his wife did not drive so could not get the family away from danger. Referring to the foster children, he said to the soldiers: “Maybe some of them are your children.” One of the soldiers struck him in the ribs with his rifle and said “Remember my mercy and get out of here!” The man got back into the car and lost consciousness.’

Sadly he also relayed accounts of young women being raped and a teenage boy being taken away from his mother at a border crossing.

Oleg had set up a thriving church for around 250 refugees in a safe country but feeling compelled to return to Ukraine, handed the congregation over to another pastor’s care and headed for Odessa.

He described the situation there as a ‘time of great tears but also opportunity’.

‘In the valleys of weeping are the springs. Every day I preach the gospel

I see the springs of grace. Hundreds come to our church to be fed and we can travel to other places to encourage believers.

‘Just after Kherson was liberated, we brought them food and water and one woman was so grateful she kissed my hands.’

Since the war, he said, he had been presented with the greatest opportunities to preach the gospel he had ever known. *‘In Kherson we ran out of Christian literature to give the crowds, which had never happened before. In the past no one was interested but now the Lord has created a great hunger for the gospel.’*

Oleg believes there will be a revival, starting from the army. *‘After 2014 [the start of Russia’s initial incursion into Ukraine], we started taking food and other supplies to the soldiers. They said we were crazy because it was so dangerous but we told them that God loved them so much that we had come to see them.’*

As a result Oleg and his team were able to pray for the soldiers and their families.

Learning to be thankful

During one city battle Pastor Sergei from eastern Ukraine helped to evacuate up to 3,000 people.

‘Shells were falling all around, even on playgrounds,’ he said. ‘But thanks to your prayers tens of thousands of people stayed alive.’

His church’s mission now is to feed those caught up in the conflict. *‘We are learning to be thankful to the Lord for what there is and really value things like water and electricity.’*

‘At one village that had been attacked we met a woman who was so happy - simply because her community had not been shelled or fired on for a day!’

Another told him: *‘We have no shops, no chemist, no water, but I praise Jesus that he has protected my house.’*

Sergei, who himself had a narrow escape when a missile exploded near his car, added: *‘They have taught me how to be thankful. In Ukraine we are learning to be thankful to the Lord for light and water... and not being shelled!’*



Fatima thanks the Lord for His protection

When your family wants you dead

Jack Norman meets converts who have paid a high price for their faith

Life for Christians in the Middle East is challenging, although there are areas within the region where the Church is able to experience a degree of freedom.

For one particular group though – believers who have come from a Muslim background – that freedom is rare, if not completely non-existent.

Fatima* fled from one Middle Eastern country to another with her family and began going to a church to pick up food parcels. When she heard that the Christian God was a God of peace and love, she became curious.

Initially, she was advised to go to the church only for food parcels; in fact her husband would beat her to reinforce the message. However, she continued praying, and God gave her a vision of herself walking up a staircase followed by four children and her husband (she only had two children at the time).

As a result, she gave her life to Christ. However, when her father found out he threatened her over the phone, saying, 'Tomorrow look out for a car with men who are coming to cut off your head.'

Initially afraid she then felt a sense of strength in herself and told him she was now a Christian. The next day her mother rang to tell her that her father had died of a sudden heart attack.

Then her uncle stole her inheritance from her father, bought a van with the



Michael

money and told her mother: 'Tell your daughter, if she returns [home] we will cut her head off and play football with it.' Shortly afterwards her uncle died in an accident with the van.

Fatima thanks the Lord for His protection, although she still faces threats from her family. She is also grateful that God fulfilled the vision He gave her: she now has four children, who along with her husband, all follow the Lord!

Recounting to me a similar experience was Michael*, who was brought up in a strict Islamic home, but began to question his faith while a student. Much to his family's shame, he was thrown out of college.

Eventually he too, like Fatima, moved to another country in the Middle East, but by this time his marriage had broken down and his mother had disinherited him. Nevertheless questions about God kept coming, and after visiting many churches he became a believer.

Then his troubles really began. His mother found out and sent family members to beat him up. On one occasion he was attacked by a group of men who included his cousin. Forcing him to the ground, his cousin placed his foot on Michael's neck and held a knife to his throat. Michael said to him: 'If you kill me, cousin, and I am right, then it is good news for me; I will be with Jesus.' One of the others persuaded his cousin just to beat him instead.

Later on his daughter from his first marriage visited him. As they were about to eat, she tipped over the table and confessed that her grandmother, his mother, had sent her to poison him, but she couldn't go through with it.

Michael still faces threats but wants his story to inspire others; and asks us to pray that his family will come to faith.

I am thankful for the many such as Michael and Fatima who are turning to Christ but am reminded of the price they pay. Let's hold them constantly in our prayers.

**Names changed to protect identities*

Christian martyr tour dates



We are delighted to announce a speaker tour in June to mark the conclusion of our *Out of these Ashes* campaign.

The tour includes several dates across England and Wales, culminating in a final event at Holy Trinity Church in Eastbourne on Thursday, June 29, the Day of the Christian Martyr. This final event will also be broadcast online.

The speakers will include Pastor Eric Foley from our associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs Korea who will join us for the final two events in Southampton and Eastbourne. From his extensive experience working with North Korean Christians, Dr Foley will challenge us on the meaning of 'martyrdom' for Christians in the UK.

Thursday 22nd June

Life Church, Lichfield

Monday 26th June

Thornhill Church, Cardiff

Tuesday 27th June

Bradley Stoke Evangelical Church, Bristol

Wednesday 28th June

Southampton Lighthouse International Church

Thursday 29th June

Holy Trinity, Eastbourne



Photos help keep our family's plight in focus

Following the success of our involvement at Christian conferences and festivals in 2022, we will be on the road again this summer exhibiting at several events including Bible by the Beach, Big Church Festival, the Keswick Convention, New Wine United 23 (TBC), ReFuel and Bangor Worldwide.

This year our exhibition stand focuses on Christians in flight. Our main banner displays a 'flight' map highlighting multiple situations across the world where Christians have been forced to flee because of their faith. To help bring the reality of this issue to people's attention, in the foreground we will recreate a scene from a refugee camp with a blue tarpaulin tent structure, clothes, cooking utensils, suitcases, and a video projector displaying the background sights and sounds of a typical camp. We want our stand to be an immersive experience for those who visit and one that will have a lasting impact.

One of the few items a displaced family may quickly be able to grab when forced to flee at short notice is a precious family photo. So, we have produced framed photos of several Christian refugee families we know which will be given out to those who sign up for our prayer resources. These framed photos can be displayed on walls or mantelpieces next to their own family photos as a reminder to pray regularly for these believers and others who have had to flee because of their faith.

If you are at a Christian event this summer, please do come say hello at our stand. We would love to see you.



Keir's coffee morning proves grounds for celebration

A huge thanks to 16-year-old Keir and everyone at Stonelaw Church in Rutherglen who raised a staggering £2,000-plus through a special coffee morning in aid of Release International's work!

Keir, pictured, heard our Engagement Manager James Fraser speak at the church last summer and was so moved to learn about the experiences of persecuted Christians that he decided to do something practical to help.

'It really hit me how badly some people are treated because of their faith,' said Keir. He was hugely encouraged by the support of the church congregation who turned out en masse to support the fundraising event, and when asked if he would do something similar again, replied: *'One hundred per cent!'*

Parliamentary prayer breakfast

Release International will once again be taking part in the annual Christians in Parliament Prayer Breakfast.

The theme for this year's event, which takes place on Tuesday, June 27, will be **'The power of forgiveness in public life'**.

We will be hosting a seminar called 'Father, forgive them: Praying for persecutors of Christians in East Asia', and are delighted that Bob Fu, President of ChinaAid, and Eric Foley, CEO of Voice of the Martyrs Korea, will be our special guest speakers.

At last year's event we focused on persecution in several countries in Africa, under the theme of 'God's goodness in times of trial'. This year the spotlight will be on countries such as China, North Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia, calling for prayer not just for those who are persecuted, but for those who perpetrate cruelty and violence towards them.



Blind auction for painting

Claudia Lopez, a contemporary artist based in Surrey whose commissions can be found in offices, restaurants and homes in Colombia, from where she comes, London, Paris, Venice and Texas, is offering one of her works for auction to help persecuted Christians.

Claudia, who previously donated a painting for auction to Release International in 2018, has produced and sold many works of art both of her own inspiration and by commission.

The painting, *Rooted in Love*, pictured, which is being offered for auction, is a diptych in mixed media (oil and sands on board) measuring 62cm x 124cm.

Claudia said: *'I love painting trees. I see holy men and women as trees rooted and established in love, full of His power to resist evil and to fight the good fight of the faith.'*

'My persecuted brothers and sisters at the battlefield in most countries remind me that all who delight in pursuing righteousness and are determined to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted but also that they are blessed and theirs is God's kingdom.'

Supporting our 'Out of these Ashes' campaign, she added: *'Nigeria's spiritual presence is so important for the whole of Africa and that is why we need to intercede for the church of Nigeria.'*

Claudia's paintings of this size have sold for between £1,500 and £1,800. *Rooted in Love* is unframed and will need to be collected by the

winning bidder by arrangement with the artist.

How To Bid:

If you would like to bid for this original work of art please email your offer to info@releaseinternational.org putting 'painting' in the subject line, by **1pm on Monday, May 1**. Bids received after this time will not be accepted. Please bid in pounds and pence, such as £521.56; that way we will be able to locate the winner more easily.

The highest offer will win. In the event of two or more equal highest bids, the bidders will be offered the chance to submit further offers. If the new offers are the same, the winner will be drawn by lot.

Money raised from the sale will go to the work of Release International helping persecuted Christians.



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

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Full list of dates at: releaseinternational.org/artless-theatre-tour

THE WORD

The fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians provides the perfect assurance for dealing with persecution including martyrdom, says Release International's Charlie Frank

Three pleas we would do well to act upon

This issue we've encountered stories that may have left us pondering: 'What would I do in that situation?' For those of us engaging with that question, and for our brothers and sisters whose reality of faith is intertwined with martyrdom, 1 Corinthians 15 provides us with the facts, assurances and tools we need when faced with evil.

'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

(1 Corinthians 15:55-58)

The hope and promises of the gospel, as described in 1 Corinthians 15, are more glorious than anything this world has to offer. It is the hope of this glory that upholds our brothers and sisters and keeps them faithful, even unto death. This is why the Apostle Paul ends with three pleas, three exhortations, to the Corinthian church. Our martyred brothers and sisters listened to these and acted; we would do well to do the same.

Throughout the gospels and the epistles, there are repeated calls and commands to stand with Jesus, and only with Jesus. His teaching is the solid rock upon which we stand - to

build our lives upon anything else is akin to building a house on sand. His promises are like his steadfast love - they endure forever. Scripture makes it clear to us that worldly goods, treasures and comforts do not last - but life in Jesus does. So stand firm.

Some things are too important to say only once. Paul needs his readers and listeners to understand, to really understand, that they have nowhere else to turn outside of the loving arms

When you face death, give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

For there are those who are lost and do not know Christ.

of Christ. Apart from Him, there is no victory. Without Him, death regains its

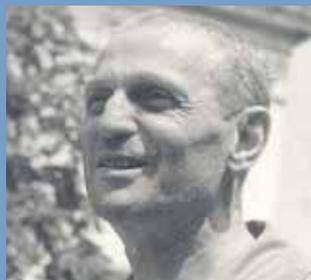
sting. We stand condemned when we stand on our own. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you.

Whether life is going smoothly, or whether life is hard, give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. When you face death, give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. For there are those who are lost and do not know Christ. There are those for whom the sting of death is both real and permanent. We may face suffering, but we have an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade. Those killed for Christ are now with Him and have received that inheritance.

They always gave themselves fully to the work of the Lord, knowing that their labour in the Lord was not in vain.

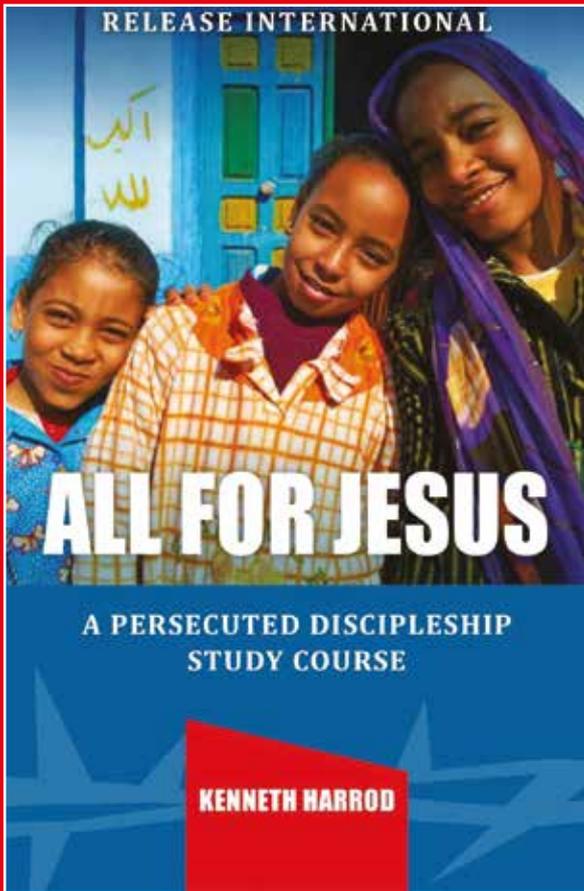
Can we say the same?

INSPIRING FAITH



'The Underground Church is a poor and suffering church, but it has few lukewarm members.'

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand 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.



All for Jesus

'The course has helped me enormously to understand that God's word has so much application to truly support and answer difficult questions - even on persecution and suffering.'

- A five-part study ideal for small groups
- The course focuses on Christian discipleship and how persecution informs, challenges and shapes what it means to live as a disciple of Christ
- Each study focuses on a passage of Scripture and there are notes for group leaders at the back
- Ideal course for Lent or any time of the year
- The 50-page booklet is available for £4 - plus we offer a special discount for churches buying copies for groups: just £9 for ten copies

Order at releaseinternational.org/shop or call 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.

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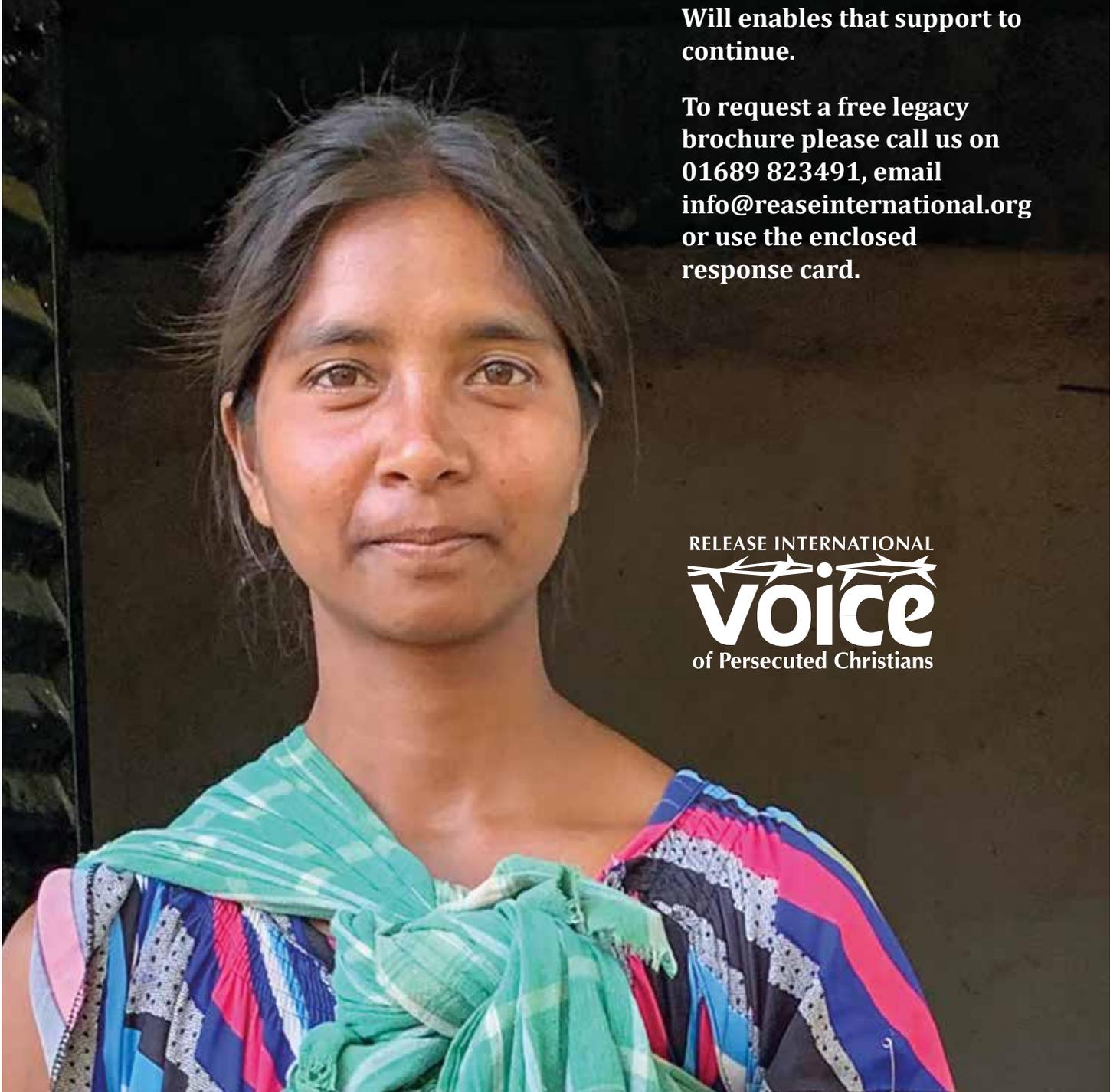
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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

prayershield

April – June 2023



APRIL 2023

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Your word, for the way it strengthens me, guides me and reminds me of Your love and faithfulness.

Father, I pray that Your word will sustain my persecuted family, especially those who don't have a Bible.

Help them put on the 'belt of truth' each day (Ephesians 6:14) to enable them to stand firm.

And may I be bolder in sharing Your word, Lord.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

NIGERIA

SATURDAY 1: Pray for God's people in Nigeria – that they will place their trust in His steadfast love and not lose hope, amid the violence and intense persecution.

SUNDAY 2: Please pray for Christian communities that have been attacked repeatedly, sometimes over years. In Bauchi state's Tafawa Balewa county, which suffered yet another raid in January, many villages lie in ruins.

MONDAY 3: Pray for believers in Enugu state where Christian communities are suffering repeated attacks and

kidnappings. More than 100 believers were killed in Eha-Amufuin village in December alone.

TUESDAY 4: As we launch our *Out of these Ashes* campaign today, ask God to remind our persecuted family in Nigeria that they are not forgotten. Please stand with us in praying for Nigeria each weekend for the next three months (**dates in green**).

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
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WEDNESDAY 5: Please ask God to bless all those involved in serving persecuted Christians through trauma-healing workshops run by our partner Stefanos Foundation.

THURSDAY 6: Thank God for the work of Release International partners who are providing spiritual and practical support to those who are being attacked and displaced.

FRIDAY 7: On Good Friday, please pray for the families of all those who have been martyred for their faith. Pray that as they share in Christ's suffering, so too their 'comfort abounds through Christ' (2 Corinthians 1:5).

SATURDAY 8: Gbashaor Joseph, his wife and four children were among 12 Christians killed recently in a Fulani raid on Abagena, Benue state. Many others were injured. Pray for justice for this community.

SUNDAY 9: O Lord our Refuge, as we celebrate Your resurrection, we pray for Christians in Nigeria who have been forced to flee their homes because of violent attacks. Heal them from the trauma they have experienced and provide them with a safe and secure place to live.

LAOS

MONDAY 10: Thank God for the powerful witness of 'Phomme' (pictured) who shares the gospel as she sells vegetables in central Laos. She has been persecuted for refusing



In central Laos, grocer 'Phomme' refuses to deny Christ despite persecution

to return to worshipping ancestral spirits.

TUESDAY 11: Ask God to strengthen recently widowed BoonMee, who put her faith in Christ after He healed her. Family and neighbours have rejected her for turning against animist beliefs.

WEDNESDAY 12: Pray for the family of evangelical pastor Sy Seng Manee who was killed in Khammouane province late last year. Officials, relatives and neighbours had warned him of the risks of sharing his faith – but he continued.

THURSDAY 13: Please pray that those who persecute believers in Laos will start to ask questions about Jesus.

FRIDAY 14: Ask God to raise up bold men and women of faith to lead the church in Laos. There are many house churches and some church buildings, but most do not have a trained pastor.

SATURDAY 15: In January, Pastor Jerry Hinjari of Christ Nation International was

abducted and killed in Yola, Adamawa state, Nigeria. Pray for his congregation and family.

SUNDAY 16: O Lord our Comforter, we pray for the families of Christian martyrs in Nigeria. For the wives and husbands, children and parents, sisters and brothers who have been deprived of those closest to them. Bring them comfort in their grief and hope for the future.

IRAN

MONDAY 17: Ask God to sustain believers in Iran amid the current wave of persecution targeting those who have converted to Christianity.

TUESDAY 18: Pray that the authorities in Iran will respond positively to calls for greater freedom and stop criminalising the peaceful activities of the church.

WEDNESDAY 19: Pray for Pastor Abdolreza (Matthias) Haghnejad, who was recently arrested with two other Christian converts in Bandar

Anzali and who is detained in Rasht. His successful appeal against a six-year sentence was overruled last year, leading to his re-arrest.

THURSDAY 20: Pray for Anahita (Anna) Khademi, wife of Pastor Abdolreza (above): she faces charges including 'propaganda against the system'. She was arrested in January and released on bail.

FRIDAY 21: Ask the Lord to comfort former prisoner of faith Nasser Navard Goltapeh whose mother Sahab died recently. Thank God that Nasser had been pardoned and released a few weeks earlier, halfway through his ten-year sentence.

SATURDAY 22: Pray for Pastor 'Monday' whose church in Nigeria was devastated by Fulani attacks and who was kidnapped and held for ransom. Release International partners are supporting him as he recovers from this trauma.

SUNDAY 23: O Lord our Rescuer, we pray for Christians who have been kidnapped and are currently being held by terrorist groups in Nigeria. Keep their faith strong and protect them from mistreatment. May they be released soon and returned to their families.

MYANMAR

MONDAY 24: Pray for those in predominantly Christian regions who are subject to indiscriminate attacks by Myanmar's military trying to crush rebel resistance.

Churches seem to be specifically targeted.

TUESDAY 25: Pray for Karen villagers in Lay Wah, where fighter jets destroyed two churches and killed five people in January.

WEDNESDAY 26: In a raid on Chan Thar in the Sagaing region, military forces set fire to a church and destroyed the village. Pray for the 3,000 villagers forced to flee.

THURSDAY 27: Pray for Dr Hkalam Samson, former president of the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), who was arrested in December as he was about to fly to Bangkok for medical treatment. KBC has been told he will be prosecuted over his preaching.

FRIDAY 28: Pray for strength, wisdom and encouragement for believers in Myanmar as they serve others amid so much pressure.

SATURDAY 29: Ask God to 'renew a steadfast faith' in members of New Life for All Church in Dantsauri, Katsina state, Nigeria. Militants wounded Pastor Haruna, and five women and girls were reportedly kidnapped, including Nooseba, aged 13.

SUNDAY 30: Sovereign Lord, we pray for the Government in Nigeria. May they fulfil their duty to govern justly and provide security for all their people. Give them the courage and political will to tackle radical groups and work for peace and proper representation in all regions of the country.

MAY 2023

ERITREA

MONDAY 1: Pray that the church in Eritrea will grow and be refined in the fire of persecution.

TUESDAY 2: Pray for the more than 400 Christians believed to be in jail for their faith in Eritrea.

WEDNESDAY 3: Pray for the release of 44 Christians – 39 women and five men – arrested as they gathered in homes recently. They are being held in Mai Serwa prison near Asmara.

THURSDAY 4: Please pray for former prisoner of faith Twen Theodros, who was recently released after 16 years in jail. Thank God for her strong faith and forgiving heart.

FRIDAY 5: Pray that the Eritrean Government will allow full freedom of belief once again.

SATURDAY 6: Please pray for Monday Ali, 29, who is receiving support from our partners in Nigeria. His parents were among 15 people killed in an attack on their village in Niger state; 14 others were kidnapped.

SUNDAY 7: Merciful God, we pray for the persecutors of Your people in Nigeria – for Boko Haram terrorists, Fulani militants and other radicalised groups. We pray that You will open their eyes and convict the heart of every individual. Move them to turn away from violence and embrace the love of Jesus.



'I did not want revenge because I know God had a plan.' Bomb blast survivor Fenny, Indonesia

INDONESIA

MONDAY 8: Thank God for the overcoming faith of Fenny (pictured), who survived the 2018 terrorist attack on Surabaya Central Pentecostal Church (see *Voice* magazine, pages 14-15). She has no bitterness towards the bombers, despite prolonged suffering.

TUESDAY 9: Pray for Christian apologist Gratia Pello who has not been seen since he

was arrested in East Java in December. He is well known for his YouTube videos comparing Christianity with Islam.

WEDNESDAY 10: Thank God for the surprise visit of President Joko Widodo, a Muslim, to two churches at Christmas: he called for 'tolerant relations' between different faiths.

THURSDAY 11: In Cilebut Barat, near Jakarta, local residents barred the Batak Christian

Church from worshipping in a private home. Pray for churches facing local opposition, including from extremist groups.

FRIDAY 12: Pray for an Elim Church congregation which was barred from holding a service outside a city hall in Medan, North Sumatra, recently. The church had earlier been banned from meeting in a rented room in a shopping centre elsewhere in the city.

SATURDAY 13: Fulani militants destroyed the home of the Bishop of Kanfanchan Diocese, Kaduna, Nigeria. He has condemned the state for failing his people. Ask God to protect and strengthen community leaders demanding justice.

SUNDAY 14: Faithful God, we pray that You will empower Your people in Nigeria to persevere. They have experienced so much suffering and some wrestle with doubt and difficult questions. Assure them of Your love and show them that You are the God who suffers with them. Keep them in Your steadfast love.

INDIA

MONDAY 15: Hundreds of villagers armed with sticks and rods attacked a church in Narayanpur, Chhattisgarh state, accusing members of forced conversion. Pray that God will bring peace to this community.

TUESDAY 16: Pray for justice for the 30 pastors believed to

be detained in Uttar Pradesh, under false charges of forced conversion.

WEDNESDAY 17: Pray for 13 Christian families recently expelled from their village in Chhattisgarh because they refused to deny their faith and embrace their former tribal religion.

THURSDAY 18: Pray that those who persecute Christians in India will come to know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

FRIDAY 19: Pray that the Indian Government will have a change of heart and decide that religious liberty is the bedrock of a democratic society and act decisively to uphold it.

SATURDAY 20: Esther lost three relatives when Fulani militants attacked Mallagum in Kaduna state, Nigeria: soldiers stationed nearby to 'protect' villagers are alleged to have joined in the assault. Pray for the families of all 29 people who died.

SUNDAY 21: Forgiving Father, we pray that You will give Your persecuted children in Nigeria the grace to forgive their enemies. Humanly speaking this seems impossible. The scale of

The only thing is to forgive them. Once you have that heart of forgiveness, you will live.'

Esther who lost three close relatives in a Fulani raid, Kaduna, Nigeria

hurt and loss is vast. But the gospel calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven and we pray You will enable them to do this.

CHINA

MONDAY 22: Please continue to pray that South Korea will grant asylum to 60 members of the persecuted Shenzhen Reformed Holy 'Mayflower' Church. Judges in Seoul, apparently under pressure from China, have so far rejected their asylum claim.

TUESDAY 23: Thank God that elderly Sun Jinhuan was able to visit her son Pastor John Cao in prison in Yunnan province for the first time in three years. He is serving seven years for 'illegal border crossing' into Myanmar.

WEDNESDAY 24: Lin Xuesui was arrested in Sichuan province in 2022 and accused of involvement in 'illegal gatherings', apparently in connection with his ministry work there. Thank God he was released on bail in January: pray charges will be dropped.

THURSDAY 25: Praise God for the witness of Early Rain Covenant Church members in Chengdu, Sichuan province. They provided quilts and winter clothes for guards keeping watch over the home of their preacher Dai Zhichao.

FRIDAY 26: Pray that God will sustain Hao Ming, an elder of Early Rain Qingcaodi Church in Deyang city, who was recently charged with fraud.

He has been detained since late-2021.

SATURDAY 27: Pray for Henry Monday Adeh and his family, whose home was burnt down by Fulani militants in Nigeria. Thank God that Release International partners were able to rebuild their house.

SUNDAY 28: O Lord our Provider, we pray for Release International partners who are working to distribute food and medical packages as well as trauma-counselling support to many of those who have been displaced in Nigeria. Lead them to the right places, protect them as they travel and renew their energy for the work.

MONDAY 29: Wang Minghai and Wan Hongxia, teachers at Xuande School of Mount Carmel Church in Wuhu, were charged with 'illegal business operations' and tried in January. Thank God they were sent home to their families but they remain under surveillance.

TUESDAY 30: Pray for Li Shanshan of Linfen Covenant House Church in Shanxi province whose husband Pastor Li Jie is in jail. Police recently summoned and threatened her, trying to make her admit to false fraud charges against the church.

WEDNESDAY 31: Pray for members of Beijing Shouwang Church which has been persecuted since 2004, including being forcibly closed in 2019. Pastor Zhang Xiaofeng was detained for ten days after police raided a meeting in February.

JUNE 2023

UKRAINE

THURSDAY 1: Stand with Pastor Oleg in praying for revival in Ukraine. Last year, he returned to Odessa to share the gospel and support the church, having previously left Ukraine to plant a church elsewhere (see *Voice* magazine, pages 16-18).

FRIDAY 2: Pray for Pastor T who served and helped evacuate many from his Russian-occupied town before being forced to flee himself (see *Voice* magazine, pages 16-18). Thank God for all that the Ukrainian church is learning through persecution.

SATURDAY 3: Praise God for the overcoming faith of our Nigerian partner and Anglican Archbishop of Jos Ben Kwashi who has rebuilt his church on Bauchi Road four times, following attacks.

SUNDAY 4: God of all hope, we pray for Release International partners who train pastors and church leaders to share the gospel with those who oppose them. Thank You for their courage and love. Thank You for many who have already come to faith as a result. We pray that You will continue to protect and grow this ministry. May Your kingdom come in north and central Nigeria.

MONDAY 5: Praise God for the witness to gratitude of Pastor Sergei and his church in eastern Ukraine (see *Voice*

magazine, pages 16-18). He says: 'We are learning to be thankful to the Lord for light and water... and not being shelled!'

TUESDAY 6: Thank God for Pastor 'Ivan' and his wife 'Viktoria' who stayed to serve their community in the Kharkiv region during the Russian invasion last year. Ivan was imprisoned and tortured but survived.

WEDNESDAY 7: Pray for the swift return of three church leaders seized by Russian soldiers in the Russian-occupied Berdyansk district in Zaporizhzhia late last year. Their whereabouts are unknown.

THURSDAY 8: Emmanuel Baptist Church in Russian-occupied Luhansk, from which the community has been barred since 2017, was recently seized by Russian military. Pray this house of God will be returned to its owners.

FRIDAY 9: Continue to pray for the family of martyred Pentecostal deacon Anatoly Prokopchuk and his son Aleksandr, 19, from Nova Kakhovka in Kherson region. Their bodies were found in a wood in November.

SATURDAY 10: Pray for Daniel and seven other members of his community near Miango, Plateau state, Nigeria, who are training for the ministry. Daniel's older brother, Pastor Matthew, was shot dead by Fulani militants (see *Voice* page 10).

SUNDAY 11: Loving God, we pray for our sister Rose Tagwi and her children as they continue to grieve for their husband and father, Matthew (see previous prayer). Your word tells us that You show special care to widows and orphans, so we pray for Your comfort and provision for them. We pray too for Matthew's mother, father and brothers who have also been greatly impacted by his loss.

TURKEY

MONDAY 12: Pray for churches in south-east Turkey, as they minister to survivors of February's earthquake. Pray that many will be moved by their witness to God's unconditional love.

TUESDAY 13: Thank God for the faithful witness of the church in Malatya which despite persecution continues to build God's kingdom, most recently through its ministry to the deaf community.

WEDNESDAY 14: Continue to pray for ultra-nationalist groups responsible for the murder of three Christians at a Bible publishing house in Malatya in 2007 – and, according to recent allegations, plotted to kill three church leaders in 2016 too.

THURSDAY 15: Ask God to protect an Iranian believer who is serving the church in Malatya after being tortured in Iran. He faces potential deportation to Iran.



Though Christians in Turkey face strong opposition, they still boldly share the gospel and gather for worship

FRIDAY 16: Pray for growth in the church in Turkey where believers are often opposed by their families, communities and government.

SATURDAY 17: Please pray for Buskilla from Niger state, Nigeria, whose husband was killed by Fulani three years ago. She and her family are being fed by neighbours but are also under extreme pressure to convert to Islam.

SUNDAY 18: O Lord our Shield, we pray for Ladi Chohu and her family whose home was destroyed when militants attacked their village. We thank You that they have been able to return to their village. We pray that You will heal them from the trauma they experienced and protect them from future attacks.

PAKISTAN

MONDAY 19: Pray for the family of farm worker Emmanuel Masih who was beaten to

death in Punjab, allegedly by Muslim men who accused him of stealing oranges.

TUESDAY 20: In Renala, Punjab province, Christian Allah Ditta was shot dead by people he accused of stealing from his orchard. Pray for his family: Allah's killers have threatened to kill them if they go to the police.

WEDNESDAY 21: Please ask God to heal Sunita Masih, 19, from Karachi. A suitor threw acid on her after she refused to accept his advances or convert to Islam.

THURSDAY 22: Thank God for the courage of a Christian security guard at Karachi airport, who insisted on following regulations. Her boss threatened to accuse her of blasphemy after she denied access to a friend of his who was not carrying the correct documents.

FRIDAY 23: Pray all charges will be dropped against

Ishtiaq Saleem from Islamabad who was detained on blasphemy charges in November for allegedly posting on social media images sacrilegious to Islam, claims he denies.

SATURDAY 24: Pray for Bitrus Nkuru, a young man from Plateau state, Nigeria, whose father was killed by Fulani militants and whose mother died six months later of what he describes as 'shock and a broken heart'.

SUNDAY 25: All-knowing God, we pray that You will sustain our concern for Nigeria and deepen our compassion for our Christian family there. Help us to remain faithful in prayer, calling out to You to bring change and renew hope. We pray with our Nigerian brothers and sisters that out of these ashes will rise a wave of an uncommon, unseen revival. Thank You that You hear all our prayers.

NORTH KOREA

MONDAY 26: Release associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) USA estimates about 30,000 Christians are detained inside North Korea. Pray that the gospel will spread behind bars.

TUESDAY 27: Pray for Dylan Kim (pictured overleaf) who continues the work of his father, Kim Jong-Wook, by ministering to North Korean defectors, through our partner VOM Korea. Kim Jong-Wook is serving a life sentence in North Korea for 'spying'.



Dylan Kim ministers to North Korean defectors, as his imprisoned father did

WEDNESDAY 28: As Bibles are banned in North Korea, Christians tend to have to memorise Scripture. Ask God through the power of His Spirit to help believers commit His word to memory and share it with others.

THURSDAY 29: On Release International's *Day of the Christian Martyr*, ask God

Sources: China Aid; Forum 18; Human Rights Watch; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Release International partners and contacts; UCA News; VOM Canada; VOM USA; World Evangelical Alliance.

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.

to strengthen believers in North Korea, among the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian. Many are executed for their faith.

FRIDAY 30: Pyongyang is said to have had more than 2,000 churches in the early 1900s. Let's pray that faith in God, not man, will come to define this hermit kingdom.

Lord Jesus

You are everything to me: Counsellor and King, Saviour and Friend.

Jesus, please speak to my persecuted brothers and sisters today of Your great love for them. Remind them that You willingly went to the cross in their place.

Jesus, You have won the victory over sin and death. Fill them afresh with Your Spirit, so that they may experience Your joy and resurrection power in their lives today.

Amen