

# IF ONE SUFFERS

World Mission Council's Report  
concerning Christians living  
in a minority situation

The Church of Scotland



**IF ONE SUFFERS**

The deliverances (resolutions) agreed at the 2010 Church of Scotland General Assembly regarding the World Mission Council's report on the situation of Minority Christians were to:

- Instruct the Council to sustain and strengthen its commitment to offering meaningful solidarity to partner churches in contexts where the Christian community comes under severe pressure because of its minority status.
- Instruct the Council to work with partner churches on the development of inter-religious dialogue with a view to promoting religious freedom and resolving the difficulties currently faced by Christians who suffer on account of their minority status.
- Instruct the Council to make known to the Church at large the situations of discrimination and/or persecution which are faced by partner churches and other Christian communities at this time.
- Instruct the Council to raise awareness among elected politicians of the discrimination and persecution Christians face in many countries, and as a part of that awareness raising to send copies of the report to appropriate Scottish and UK Government Ministers, Members of Scottish Parliament, Members of Parliament representing Scottish constituencies, and Members of the European Parliament representing Scotland.
- Urge all Kirk Sessions to consider how their congregations can best
  - (a) raise awareness of the issues facing minority Christians;
  - (b) offer prayer support to minority Christians;
  - (c) undertake advocacy on behalf of minority Christians; and,
  - (d) take practical action to demonstrate solidarity with minority Christians.

# FOREWORD

When the World Mission Council reported to the General Assembly on Christian communities who live as a minority religion, that part out of everything that the Council had to say aroused more comment and more interest – and, I expect, more prayer – than all of the rest. There are three reasons for this.

Firstly, it is a really good report. It is a report that tells the truth, and tells it in language that is plain and clear and revealing. It is a report based on good evidence, especially the evidence we have received from many of our partner churches in different parts of the world. Like all the best reports it is a combination of facts and stories: the situations of named individuals in several countries are highlighted throughout the report. It is a report which does not indulge in scaremongering or blame; its balanced assessment is all the more effective for that.

Secondly, the story it tells is one which needs to be heard. Very few people will have been aware of the whole story which it tells. Some will know of one country or another - the strength of this report is the broad sweep which takes in the four corners of the world. North Korea is nothing like Nigeria; the situation of Christians in each country is quite different, and yet some of these Christians are joined by fear and danger in the midst of which they have to live their daily lives. We hear little enough of the plight of the people of Iraq since the invasion, and we hear nothing of the plight if Iraqi Christians. The report tells us, "It is estimated that at least half of the Christian population of Iraq have left the country, while many more have been internally displaced."

Thirdly, we are not left helpless after we have read the report. So often the response to any story of distress is, "But what can we do?" Here, no less than eight practical steps are outlined for congregations and individuals and for the whole church. The World Mission Council will play its part; others must do the same. "*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of those who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*" (Proverbs 31: 8-9.)



**Andrew McLellan**, Convener, World Mission Council



# REPORT

## Christian Communities in Minority Situations

“There is no division in the body, but all its different parts have the same concern for one another. If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness. All of you are Christ’s body, and each one is a part of it”. 1 Cor.12.25-27.

An important responsibility of the World Mission Council is to listen to its partners throughout the world and to inform the Church of Scotland of what they are saying. Having heard from partners that Christians in many places face far greater pressure than the western church often recognises, and hearing their plea that their tale be told to the wider world, the General Assembly accepted the following deliverance in 2008:

*The General Assembly express solidarity with churches that are in a minority situation and are faced with discrimination and violence; resolve to share common commitment and take decisive action collectively to assist such minority churches that are caught in situations of violence and conflict; instruct the Council*

- (1) to find creative ways of including inter-religious dialogue as a vehicle to promote and protect the rights of minorities;*
- (2) to seek to bring awareness about such situations in the global Christian community*
- (3) to help and advise partner churches in developing selfunderstanding and identification through capacity building and theological education;*

- (4) to strengthen ecumenical groups and movements in minority churches for the building of a tolerant society;*
- (5) to raise the issues facing minority churches in international forums for redress and remedy; and report to the General Assembly in 2009.*

Recognising the scale and complexity of this deliverance, the World Mission Council soon realised that a report to the 2010 General Assembly was more feasible, and reported accordingly in 2009. In 1800, an estimated 2,500 Christians died as a result of opposition to their faith. A century later, that total had risen to 34,400, and it is thought that more Christians died violent deaths in the 20th century than in all of previous Christian history. This pressure has not eased in the first decade of the 21st century: based on current statistical trends, it is estimated that around 176,000 Christians may have died for the faith in 2009.

It is recognised that Christians have also been among the oppressors and persecutors. The brutality of the Crusades is remembered throughout much of the Middle East, and the complicity of professing Christians in any genocide, including the Jewish Holocaust, cannot be forgotten. Christians have tortured and even burned their fellow Christians in the Inquisition, the religious wars throughout Europe and the treatment of witches in Scotland. It was observed in South Africa that “Christians are killing Christians and other Christians are sitting on the fence.” Any report on the persecution of Christians must be made in a spirit of deep humility.

The World Mission Council also acknowledges that persecution of

Christians is not new. Stephen was stoned to death as the first known Christian martyr; Paul was stoned and left for dead in Lystra and, with Silas, was beaten and imprisoned in Philippi; St John the Divine was exiled on Patmos. Persecution is a recurrent theme throughout the New Testament, as is the teaching that the coming of Christ brings crisis to the world.

In the centuries that have followed, Dutch and German Mennonites and French Huguenots migrated to avoid persecution, and Armenian Christians perished in what has been a largely forgotten genocide. However, there is widespread acceptance that the level of persecution of Christians, whether by discrimination or direct violence, has been greater in the last century than in any other period in the history of the Christian Church.

Since terrorist attacks on the United States of America on the 11 September 2001, new polarisations and pressures have been increasingly obvious. To a degree that may have surprised analysts and commentators a generation ago, religious loyalties have gained a new potency, and lie at the root of many of the world's ongoing civil wars and outbursts of political violence. Demographic projections indicate that religious feuds will intensify, especially as the future centres of global population are mainly in countries already divided by the great religious traditions of Christianity and Islam.

The impact of this is already being reported by many of the Church of Scotland's overseas partners. At a day conference held in Perth in February 2009, the Rt Rev Mano Rumalshah, Bishop of Peshawar in Pakistan, spoke movingly of threats on the life of clergy within his diocese and of a struggle to support those who, on converting from Islam to Christianity, are rejected by their families and left facing





death-threats and destitution. During last year's General Assembly, interviews with overseas church leaders were conducted; proving to be a humbling exercise for the interviewers as they listened to the realities of living as Christians in what can often be the most challenging of environments.

In the Middle East, Asia and parts of Africa, many Christian people live as a minority faith community. Some have lived in this way for many generations; others are newer communities. Some can trace their identity back to the early centuries of the Christian era; others are followers of Jesus Christ through conversion in more recent times. Often they live in harmony with neighbours from all faith communities, but at other times can be ostracised and marginalised, facing outright persecution or education and economic discrimination.

Those who live in places where Sharia law and, in particular apostasy law, are exercised, can be exposed to extreme pressures. The position of women in such places is a major cause of concern.

For these people, being salt and light requires obedience and courage and involves considerable risk. Nevertheless, rather than being demoralised by such experiences, many Christians in such difficult circumstances demonstrate a degree of vitality and dynamism in their faith which suggests they may often be closer to New Testament experience than those who live in more comfortable and secure situations. A Christian refugee from the civil war in Sudan observed that, "In the West you haven't learned to trust God as we have had to learn to trust God."

### **Israel and Palestine**

In the land of Jesus' birth, Christians find themselves caught between

the avowedly Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian community, some of whom, in desperation, turn to more radical and exclusivist forms of the Islamic faith held by the majority. The Christian community in Palestine, with its roots going back to apostolic times, is under pressure as never before.

In the context of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, Palestinian Christians suffer discrimination primarily because of their ethnic rather than their religious identity. Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine, and the harsh conditions which it imposes, inflicts privation and suffering on Palestinians regardless of their religious identity. Israel's policy of developing and/or allowing "settlements" on Palestinian land and the restrictions which it places on the everyday life of the Palestinian community creates a demoralising situation for Christians and Muslims alike. Christians living in the Holy Land, with their relatively high standards of education and connections in the Western world, often are in a position to emigrate, and many have chosen this option.

While similar numbers of young Christians and Muslims are leaving, it is estimated that out of every ten Muslims who leave eight will return, while out of every ten Christians who leave only two will return. This, together with the higher birth rate among Muslims, means that the proportion of Christians in the Holy Land is decreasing faster than the absolute number. Families find it even more difficult to persuade their children to remain in a situation which grows more unjust and intolerable.

Historically, the Palestinian nationalist struggle united Muslims and Christians, with its intellectuals and leaders often being drawn from within the Christian community. Whether by means of an active

Israeli strategy or simply on account of the pressures of the occupation, recent years have seen a growing polarisation between these two historic religious communities. While Muslim and Christian leaders work together on the human rights situation, the failure of the peace process can lead to Christians in general being regarded by some as being in collusion with the West in its perceived hostility to Islam and unquestioning support of Israel. At grassroots level, many Christians now find themselves subject to barbed comments and active hostility from their Muslim neighbours. There is also great concern that in the very cradle of Christianity the Arab Christian church is shrinking so rapidly. Historically, Nazareth was largely populated by Arab Christians but today they are in the minority. Outside the Church of the Annunciation, a group of Muslims erected a banner quoting the Koran, "God is One, the Eternal God. He begot none, nor was He begotten. None is equal to Him." It was the chosen location rather than the Muslim statement of belief that was made, that caused most offence. In a context where Christians are in even more of a minority, such actions can easily make them feel vulnerable and threatened. This increases the sense within the Christian community that it has no future in its historic homeland.

A tragic incident in Gaza in October 2007 illustrates something of the complexity of the situation. Rami Ayyad, who managed the only Bible Bookshop in Gaza, was kidnapped and found murdered a few days later. He had previously been beaten and accused of handing out Christian tracts, his family had received threats, and the shop had been firebombed a few months earlier. Local Christians and Muslims joined in condemning the murder, thought to be the work of an extremist Islamist group. However, people from both Christian and Muslim groups also expressed their concern over forms of evangelism that were inappropriate within the context.

### **Initiatives of the Christian community in the Holy Land**

While some have chosen to leave this deeply troubled situation, others have taken the decision to remain and to work for positive change. This has strategic importance since the Christian community has been recognised, in the words of the late King Hussein of Jordan, as “the glue which holds the Middle East together”. Though a minority, the Christian community often forms a bridge between Muslims and Jews. Moreover, often against the odds, the churches have for many years run an extensive network of social services, which continue as a witness to the love of Christ.

The churches respond to the current demoralising situation with new initiatives, such as the Media Centre of the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem which seeks to research and promote the life, faith and culture of the Palestinian Christian community. Its work has attracted a body of young people who, despite living in “the largest open-air prison in the world”, are confident of their identity as Palestinian Christians and determined to make their future in the Land. The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East, besides a massive commitment to sustaining the life of its membership, seeks to reach out through inter-faith engagement. The Sabeel Ecumenical Theological Centre in Jerusalem exposes the injustice of the current political situation and, in contrast to the prevailing ideologies of violence, advocates an approach of non-violent resistance to the occupation. Through its staff and institutions the Church of Scotland seeks to be an active and resourceful partner, sharing the pain of those who suffer and seeking to contribute to initiatives aimed at justice, healing and reconciliation.

### **Messianic Jews**

Also under pressure in the Israeli context are the fellowships of

Messianic Jews. Without wishing to give up their Jewish identity they confess Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah and Saviour. This can expose them to considerable hostility, particularly from Orthodox Jews who sometimes organise demonstrations and other forms of harassment. Messianic Jews have occasionally found themselves subject to violence, such as receiving letter bombs.

On the other hand, in the Israeli community at large there is a growing acceptance of the witness of Messianic Jews. In a context where direct evangelism is prohibited, these believers, in common with Arab Christians, bear witness by the quality of their daily lives and are becoming known for their integrity and compassion. Increasingly they share in worship with Arab Christians, demonstrating the reconciling power of faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Bridge-building in the Holy Land**

In this troubled corner of the world Christians are in a unique position to build bridges between the various sides. The Christian Church holds perhaps the best chance of bringing people together for a permanent solution with its connections to the land where Jesus lived, ministered, and died; to the Jewish people, as Jesus was a Jew; and to the Palestinian community, since most Christians are ethnically Arab/Palestinian.

The challenge to Christians is to further Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation, breaking down the dividing walls of hostility and accepting all people being reconciled to each other and to God through Jesus Christ.

The Church of Scotland has its own contribution to make to this dialogue through the new Centre for Justice, Peace, and Inter-faith Dialogue planned for Tiberias, and for the first time in several years

it has a full team of mission partners sharing in bridge-building in the Holy Land.

## Egypt

Though predominantly Islamic, Egypt has a Christian minority thought to number around 12% of the population. There is official discrimination against Christians, with Coptic Christians being especially singled out. By law the President must be a Muslim, though other political offices can be held by Christians. Reports point to an increase in the persecution of Christians, with attacks by the pro-Sharia Muslim Brotherhood on churches and an increase in mob attacks, particularly on Coptic villages, properties and clergy. Other forms of persecution are more subtle, with only a very limited number of university places being made available for Christians.

As in some other predominantly Islamic societies, Muslims who decide to become Christians can face serious difficulties. Such converts can suffer human rights abuses ranging from illegal detention without official charges, physical intimidation from security forces to violence from religious extremists and their communities. Often those who are drawn to faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour opt to remain within an Islamic religious and cultural identity. Those who choose to be baptised and to be publicly identified as Christians may have to leave the country.

For an Egyptian Muslim, the decision to be baptised as a Christian is a costly one. Nonetheless there are those who decide to take this path of discipleship, such as the Egyptian who was publicly baptised by the Pope Benedict XVI on Easter Day 2008.





Musa was born in Egypt and brought up as a Muslim. Whilst still a young man he made friends with a Christian and tried to convert him to Islam. He failed and started to take a great interest in Christianity. Knowing that according to Sharia law he could be executed for changing from Islam to Christianity he left the country. After various difficulties he arrived in Scotland as a refugee and, after a spell in a detention centre, was granted a humanitarian visa. Musa began to attend a Church of Scotland congregation and in due course was baptised as a Christian and changed his name. When his visa expired, with no warning he was forcibly repatriated to Egypt. He now felt very vulnerable and feared for his future. Even his family was against him, though they would not report him. He now aims to return to Scotland and participate fully in the life of the church.

### **What “a minority of the minority” can achieve**

Members of the (Presbyterian) Synod of the Nile – a partner of the Church of Scotland – face a further challenge known to many Christians within reformed churches in the Middle East. They are a “minority of the minority” since most Coptic Christians are Orthodox. Nonetheless, they form the largest Reformed Church in the Middle East and offer a significant witness. They sustain a major commitment to educational and medical work, with 30,000 children in their schools, two hospitals and a network of clinics that are open to all. Evangelism takes place primarily through personal relationships as Christians live out the gospel and share it with their friends.

The Synod is active in promoting Muslim-Christian dialogue, both at the formal and theological level and at the level of everyday life in

the community. In this way they seek to foster understanding and work for a greater level of tolerance.

## **Iraq**

No consideration of Christians in minority situations would be complete today without reference to the difficulties which have occurred in Iraq following the American and British invasion of 2003. Before the First Gulf War, around 1 million Christians inhabited Iraq. Most were Chaldeans – Eastern-rite Catholics, who trace their faith back to the early centuries of Christianity. Some still worship in Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Even older are the Assyrians, descendents of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, whose Ancient Church of the East traces its origins back to the 1st century. Other Eastern churches were also represented, along with small numbers of Anglicans and Evangelicals. Under Ba'ath Party rule the Christian community enjoyed a significant measure of protection. Though oppressive in many ways, the Ba'ath Party did not discriminate on religious lines so that, eg, Tariq Aziz, a Christian, could become Deputy Prime Minister.

In the sectarian conflicts which erupted in the wake of the 2003 invasion, Christians found themselves being systematically targeted. Church buildings came under attack with, in August 2004, a coordinated series of car bombings destroying five churches in Baghdad and Mosul. Christians themselves, perceived as being in collusion with the invading forces, were exposed to great danger. Clergy were murdered and Christians were kidnapped and tortured. On 29 February 2008, gunmen seized the leader of Iraqi Christians, the Chaldean Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul, as he left church after leading afternoon prayers. His body was found two weeks later.

Many Iraqi Christians have taken the decision to leave their homeland

for Jordan or Syria, where they seek refugee status before proceeding to other countries. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) reports that though Christians formed only 4% of the population of Iraq, 44% of Iraqi asylum seekers reaching Syria were Christian. It is estimated that at least half of the Christian population of Iraq have left the country while many more have been internally displaced moving to supposedly safer areas. Traumatic experiences of rape, kidnap and murder have led many to flee from their homes, embarking on a journey marked by danger and uncertainty.

The Church of Scotland has had little historical connection with the Christian community in Iraq. However, there are Presbyterian Churches in each of the main cities. When British troops were stationed in Basra in the south of Iraq from 2003, military chaplains made contact with the local Presbyterian congregation which was coming under great pressure amidst the chaos and violence of the post-invasion situation. As a result, its Session Clerk attended the 2007 General Assembly and spoke movingly of the vulnerability of the congregation as many of its members had left and who remained feared for their lives. Like many of their fellow Christians in Iraq they face an uncertain future but remain steadfast in their faith.

## **Pakistan**

Around 3% of Pakistan's 160 million people are Christian. Although there is a small Christian middle class of professionals, many of whom run Christian schools and hospitals with excellent reputations, most are former Dalits from the Punjab or tribal people from the Sindh. They are still poor and powerless people, likely to be employed in menial work or not employed at all. In the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) there are nearly 100,000 Christians, half of whom belong to our partner church, the Church of Pakistan.

Korian Muslims were encouraged from the mosque loudspeakers to bring their weapons and “teach the infidels a lesson”. The Christians fled leaving all their belongings behind. Houses were looted and the means of their livelihood, motorbikes, donkey carts, sewing machines and bicycles, were torched. The government did intervene fairly quickly and charges were brought against many of those responsible for the violence. However, this led to counter-charges in which 100 unknown Christians were accused, as well as 29 named Christians, including the bishop.

The bishops and presbyters expressed their feelings of outrage and helplessness. In a statement adopted at that meeting they pointed out the parlous condition of the status and security of the religious minorities in Pakistan. They identified a hardening of prejudice in society against them, along with the addition of new clauses into the Blasphemy Law which is used and abused to harass and victimise Christians. The Executive Committee of the Synod called on the Government to repeal the Blasphemy Law, to police properly the incidents that arise, to monitor the courts and to legislate for affirmative action in the job market. They challenged the political parties to stop using the “religion card” in their campaigns, and invited all their allies to help eliminate discriminatory practices. They finished by challenging themselves and their allies to approach the militant/extremist groups and remind them of their common Abrahamic faith for the good of all citizens of Pakistan. They feel that their partners have not done enough to stand with them in solidarity, and appeal for practical help and for voices to be raised at the highest international levels.

Before 9/11 Christians were not under serious threat, being able to practise their faith openly. To some extent this is still true, although

Christians are increasingly seen by some Muslims as allies of western Christians who kill Muslims. Christians are murdered for their faith. Four years ago Babar, a pastor in Peshawar, was tortured and murdered, as was Sajjad an evangelist, two years later. Pashtun converts, in particular, often have to keep their conversion secret even from their families, as relatives have been known to kill converts.

In September 2009, a 19-year-old man, Farish Masih, was arrested on what the local Christian community believed were “trumped up” blasphemy charges because he was involved with a Muslim woman. He was alleged to have committed suicide in his prison cell, but media reports claimed that he was tortured, that his ribs were broken, and that he was murdered. Islamic extremists fired shots at his funeral, injuring some of the mourners; a mob attacked a local Roman Catholic Church and some homes, and the young man’s father was beaten up before the security forces intervened.

Churches in Pakistan face pressure through the increasing Islamisation of the legal system, taxation, and public life. The growing social and economic suffocation of the Christian community and the discrimination faced by Christians when seeking employment and in the workplace, can lead to significant poverty. Muslims converting to Christianity can lose all their inheritance rights, thereby leading to the problem of secret Christian believers and spies in the midst of new converts.

In October 2009, when leaders of the Church of Pakistan gathered with their international partners, their anguish was very clear. They related the most up-to-date news of communal trouble in Faisalabad diocese after allegations of the desecration of the Koran.

In Gojra a “frenzied” mob approached the Christian Colony and a team of militants attacked it with guns and flammable chemicals. Police were unable to deal with them and ran away. 72 houses were burnt, one man was shot dead and 6 members of his family were locked in a room and burnt to death.

### **Signs of hope**

However, there are signs of hope. In 2006 the Diocese of Peshawar took the initiative in starting an inter-faith dialogue with a convention attended by 400 Muslims, 200 Christians, 100 Hindus and 100 Sikhs.

The most senior and respected religious leaders from the NWFP attended and gave the main addresses. There are now groups in all districts developing programmes which encourage peaceful co-existence. A group comprising people of all the faiths visited a refugee camp for Christians forced to flee the Swat valley. An organisation called Faith Friends has been established, and Faith Friends Youth Groups have been set up at grass-root level to promote peaceful coexistence. All those participating are at risk from extremists.

### **Nepal**

Although Nepal is now a secular state rather than a Hindu kingdom, 80% of its 30 million inhabitants are Hindu. Christians, who have grown in number from 1,000 fifty years ago to 600,000 today, make up 2% of the population. Following decades of serious repression, churches in Nepal are currently growing at a remarkable rate.

It is acknowledged that Christians experience a degree of tolerance not known before, but there remains a concern that, to date, religious freedom has not been enshrined in Nepali law.





A Christian died in a village which had no Christian cemetery. The family therefore used its own land for the burial, and this led to other villagers exhuming the body. When a group of Christians came to investigate they were beaten and driven seven kilometres along the road carrying the body. The village to which they went also refused burial, so they had to return to the original village with the corpse. Eventually the problem was resolved by the first villagers insisting on a cremation taking place, which was not the custom of that particular ethnic group. Reflecting afterwards on what had happened, some of those involved concluded that, while becoming a Christian can weaken the family and the community in the first instance, one way forward is to Christianise and reinterpret traditional Hindu or Buddhist practices. Another way is for Christians to be active in community work, and also in projects where people exchange labour, thus doing some bridge building between the different faith communities.

There is evidence of an ambivalent attitude toward Christianity on the part of the Nepali government with one student being refused permission to study theology overseas on the grounds that he might want to make converts on his return. However, the same student was allowed to go overseas to study Nepali culture in its encounter with Christianity as a social science project.

At the village level there are different problems. In one situation the only Christian in a particular village received negative comments from his family and friends and was called irreligious (“cow-eating”). Government officials assumed he had taken money and they were offensive, and when he visited a Christian friend who was in custody he was accused and treated aggressively.

## India

Around 80% of Indians are Hindus, but despite Christians only making up 4.8% of the population they number some 58 million in total. While there are proportionally more Christians in South India than in North India, there are some states in north-east India with a large proportion of Christians, eg Meghalaya with 76% and Nagaland with 93% (both on Bangladesh's northern border). Many Christians come from a Dalit background, and this is often reflected in the way the rest of society treats them. Even within the Church the caste system is still strong.

### The 2008 violence towards Christians in Orissa

India's constitution provides for full freedom of worship for all religions, but the extent to which this happens varies considerably from state to state, as is seen in five out of the 20 Indian states having anti-conversion laws. In recent years the constitutional freedom of worship has been jeopardised by the rise of "communalism" in which communities assert their religious identity through hostility to others. This is always threatening and sometimes violent. State-supported violence against Muslims in Gujarat has been the most notorious expression of communalism but Christians also can be targeted. Violence against Christians in Orissa in 2008, when hundreds were beaten and 75 died, was the worst since independence in 1948.

More than 50,000 Christians were displaced, and more than 5,000 Christian homes and 250 churches and institutions looted and damaged, often by fire. The Church of North India's (CNI), response to the violence, and its efforts to bring aid to those affected, were hindered by the indifference of the state government and the indecision of central government. The CNI saw the situation, not only as one for appeals to different levels of government, but also as "an acid test of

The story of Pramod - an Indian Christian. "Only if the culprits were arrested would we feel confident in going back to our village". Pramod's words echo the thoughts of thousands of other displaced Christians from Orissa. He is one of the Christians that Christian Solidarity Worldwide met in a relief camp in Bhubaneswar last year, and he still cannot find his way home. He currently lives in a community of 45 Catholic families in a camp in the Khandhamal district of Orissa. The families have named the camp "Shanti Nagar" meaning "place of peace". This is the fifth place they have lived since the outbreak of violence in August 2008. The villagers in Betticola, where they used to live, say the Christians must convert to Hinduism - or they can never come back. If they do go back, the villagers have threatened to kill them.

*the spiritual mettle of the Indian Christian Community as a whole as well as an opportunity to wake up from our complacency".* The All India Christian Council regularly tries to highlight the plight of minorities.

The situation since 2008 remains mixed. There remains a real fear of the violence recurring, and many pastors fear for their lives. However, the recent Indian elections have provided a measure of hope. The number of seats won by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party dropped, with all eight being lost in Orissa. The ecumenical All India Christian Council said in a statement that it "saluted the people of India for the consummate and decisive manner in which they have rejected divisive, communal, and sectarian political forces".

The chief minister of Orissa has openly answered questions about the riots, naming the radical Hindu organisations which were involved in the anti-Christian violence. Altogether 524 people were arrested

and 27 are still in prison. The Union Parliament in New Delhi has also debated the tragic events of 2008. But even with that government involvement there is still a great fear among the Christian population of Orissa that the violence might recur.

A process of government compensation to those affected by the violence is in operation, but it has been hard for some people to access and there have been many bureaucratic frustrations. Some Christians still hope to return to their village, but others have fled to try and make a new life elsewhere.

## China

The People's Republic of China is the largest country in the world with a population of 1.31 billion people. It is governed by the Chinese Communist Party. Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution declares citizens' freedom of religious belief, so long as it does not conflict with national security. The government recognises five national religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Taoism and Buddhism. The two registered church groups – The Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) (the officially sanctioned Protestant church) and the Catholic Patriotic Association (the officially sanctioned Catholic church) operate under a number of regulatory controls – on their appointments of clergy and bishops, publication of literature, registration of meeting places, working with people under the age of 18, finances and their relationships with religious groups abroad. Despite these restrictions, the number of Protestant Christians belonging to registered churches has grown rapidly during recent years to over 16 million. The TSPM runs 18 seminaries and Bible Schools throughout the country. The Amity Foundation, based in Nanjing, also printed its fifty-millionth Chinese Bible in 2007. A recent visit from the Church of Scotland indicated possibilities of the Church working with the Amity Foundation.

Many millions of Christians meet in unregistered church and house groups. These "house churches" grew especially quickly in rural areas during the 1980s and 1990s, and there are now increasing numbers of "independent" urban churches, made up of professionals and businessmen. Catholic "underground" churches also continue to meet illegally, despite some moves toward rapprochement with bishops jointly recognised by the Vatican and the government. In 2009, the 35 bishops of these churches were all either in prison, under house arrest, under surveillance or in hiding. In many areas, unregistered church groups meet freely. However in others Christians continue to face harassment and fines, and some have been imprisoned, tortured or face forced labour. In some areas, unregistered church buildings have been destroyed and property confiscated.

Gao Zhisheng is a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, a Christian lawyer and a key figure in the "rights protection" movement which seeks to defend minority rights through legal and constitutional means. Since 2005, Gao has been repeatedly arrested, imprisoned, and reportedly tortured. He has been missing since 4th of February 2009 when he was seen being detained by Chinese officials. Gao's wife and two children have since fled to the USA.

Pastor Zhang Rongliang, the leader of the unregistered China Church for Christ, was arrested without charge on 1st December 2004 in Xuhai village in Henan Province. He was later accused of falsifying a passport, obtaining passports by deception for three co-workers and illegally crossing the border. He is currently serving a seven and a half year sentence. This is his sixth imprisonment and he has previously spent a total of 12 years in prison.

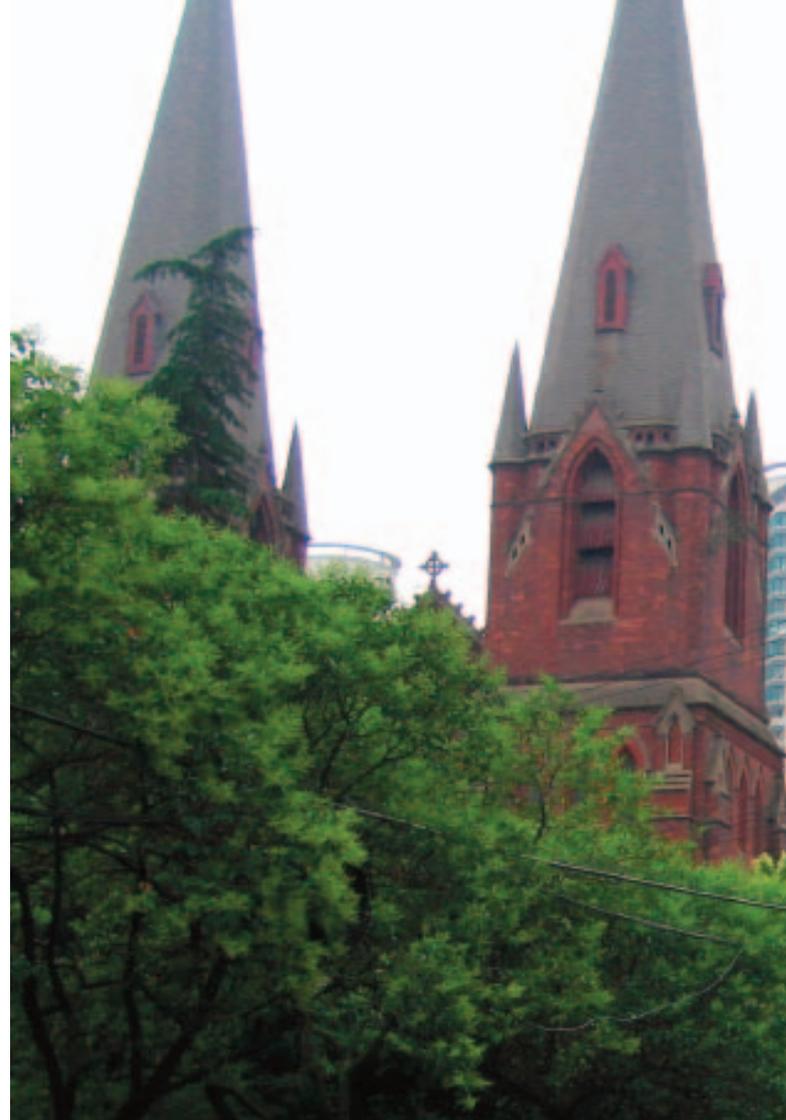
### **The complexities of the Chinese situation**

Chinese civil society has grown steadily in the last two decades as economic reforms have led to significant individual wealth and opportunities. However, imbalanced development has led to rising social inequalities and government controls remain in place to maintain social and government stability.

Christians and churches face challenges in adapting to rapidly changing social conditions, facing widespread corruption, and struggling to exercise constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms.

Most religious Chinese continue to follow Buddhism, which is regulated through the Chinese Buddhist Association. Religious officials have begun to emphasise the role that religious groups can play in building social harmony and responding to natural disasters. Christians and other religious groups cooperated with government agencies to provide humanitarian relief after the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, and this has brought a positive response from Party officials.

The current picture of the situation of Christians in China is complex. Many hoped that the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 would improve China's treatment of religious minorities (amongst others), yet this does not seem to have been the case, with a reported deterioration in religious freedom. The situation is unpredictable for many Chinese Christians, as the interpretation and implementation of government policy varies enormously from region to region. Although there is cautious optimism on the part of some Chinese Christians, concerns remain about the treatment of some individual pastors and church members.





## **North Korea**

The Democratic People's Republic of North Korea has been a repressive and secretive communist state since it came into being in 1948, and it continues in this course under its current leader Kim Jong-Il, who came to power in 1997. It is a country where there have been a number of famines, the impact of which has been worsened as a result of governmental inaction. The government teaches that their first Leader, Kim Il Sung, is the "Great Leader", and should be obeyed and revered as a "god", and its citizens are encouraged to bow before his statue and memorise his political speeches. All people are to keep the "Ten Principles" "to revere and adore the Great Leader; and eternally lift him higher". Anybody who dissents outwardly from this philosophy pays a heavy price.

Before the communist regime was installed, Pyongyang was a centre of Christian revival. Today, it is hard to know the number of Christians in North Korea. North Korea is isolated from the rest of the international community, and its culture of surveillance and propaganda curtails freedom of expression - especially criticism of the government.

In the last decade, severe famine has led to a significant increase in the number of people fleeing North Korea, and this has brought increased information about the regime. Eyewitness testimonies from victims, guards, defectors and other witnesses are sufficiently detailed to indicate that the number of severe human rights violations is deeply alarming.

### **The perceived threat from the Church**

According to the ideology of the regime, society is divided into three classes – the core class, the wavering class and the hostile class. It is estimated that 27% of the population come into this "hostile" class,

including former landowners and their families, those who collaborated with South Korea in the Korean war and those who are religiously active. Human rights abuses are seen at every level of society, but Christians are seen as a particular threat because they have an allegiance to a higher power, which is seen as a threat to the state's ideology. Some Christians are publicly executed, and others are taken away to camps where they are brutally treated. It is estimated that around 200,000 people are in political prison camps, and Christians suffer particularly badly as they are under pressure to recant their faith.

There are many reports of severe human rights abuses such as dangerous working conditions, malnutrition, torture, violence, rape and forced abortions. These camps continue to exist today, and crimes against humanity within them are a daily occurrence.

**Response: What does the Lord require of us?**

*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ... If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.*

John 15:18-21

A former North Korean prisoner highlights the problem: "Why do people talk so much about the holocaust, saying 'we must never forget' and spending money on programmes to ensure this, yet say and do nothing about the similar things which are happening right now?"

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Matthew 5:10

*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

2 Timothy 3:12

Reference has already been made to the vitality and authenticity of faith often found in Christians who face discrimination and persecution. However, the plea from the Church of Scotland's partners who live in challenging and even dangerous circumstances is for an active solidarity that "weeps with those who weep." They call upon the Church of Scotland to highlight the prevalence of persecution and to campaign, as appropriate, on their behalf for the due observation of religious freedom for all.

The words of St Paul, with which this report is prefaced, provide a timely reminder of the indivisible links the Church of Scotland has with its Christian partners throughout the world: we are all of the one Body of Christ.

Alongside that theological basis for active solidarity with Christians in minority situations, a new urgency arises from the inter-connectedness and increasing polarisation of today's world. The impact of new means of global communication is felt in many ways. It means that, for example, Danish cartoons offensive to members of the Islamic community, can quickly give rise to violence in many countries. It also can allow members of the Church of Scotland to be in instant communication with fellow Christians facing discrimination and/or persecution.

The polarisation of the global community, particularly since 9/11, has led many people to retreat into their historic identities and to view those of other faith traditions with growing suspicion or hostility. Many partner churches draw attention to their being exposed to a far greater level of suspicion, hostility and active persecution than was once the case. They are acutely aware of how political decisions made in the West are perceived in their countries, and especially by those who choose to view such decisions as evidence of an increasing and highly volatile East/West, Muslim/Christian divide. They know how bullish talk of “crusades” against evil regimes on the part of western leaders can stir up a degree of resentment feared by Christians and Muslims alike.

Close links with partner churches in minority situations also reveal the vulnerability and value of these Christian communities. In spite of forming a small percentage of populations dominated by another faith tradition, their contribution to the well-being and stability of society at large can be out of all proportion to their relative size.

In Bangladesh, the only healthcare provided in some rural areas is provided for all people by the Church. In Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, reformed Churches provide some of the finest and best-respected schools, many of which provide future politicians, doctors and academics. If the exodus of Christians witnessed in Iraq were to happen in other countries where Christians form a minority, the consequences for the wider population could be far-reaching. Pre-emptive solidarity – politically alert, culturally sensitive and spiritually grounded – with Christians in minority situations is a gospel imperative for our time.

### **“Saying it” with people**

In supporting Christians in a minority situation, the Church of Scotland

“There is no division in the body, but all its different parts have the same concern for one another. If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness. All of you are Christ’s body, and each one is a part of it”. 1 Cor.12.25-27.

works most effectively in countries where it already has a relationship or partnership on the ground, and seeks to concentrate resources where the need is greatest. It has “said it with people” by sending Mission Partners to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Israel/Palestine, and works directly with partner churches and with other denominations such as the Anglicans in Gaza and Lutherans in Bethlehem. Mission Partners, each usually linked with two presbyteries in Scotland, have been able to inform and challenge people in the pews. They support through their work in such institutions as schools and hospitals, and through WMC funds which can offer subsidised fees for Christians as necessary. Through advocacy work in Nepal and Israel/Palestine they raise a voice for peace and reconciliation in support of the Christian community at various levels of government.

An increasingly important element of support from the Church of Scotland is in the form of “twinning”, local-to-local contacts between congregations, presbyteries and dioceses. These have allowed personal contact to produce solidarity visits, often leading to practical or financial help. Pilgrim trips to the Middle East enrich the travellers and help the Christian communities who welcome them.

The Faithshare Programme brings individuals to the UK and has offered training while others have received scholarships and training in their own part of the world. Moderatorial visits highlight and

encourage Christians in minority situations by bringing their story to the world press. Area Secretaries make regular visits, record stories, share experiences, provide resources for the WMC, and demonstrate solidarity and friendship.

### **“Saying it” through the media.**

“Saying it” in the media is another important way minority groups of Christians are supported. The WMC consistently highlights their situation through Update, the weekly email news bulletin, and in the regular magazine WM, which recently devoted an entire edition to the subject. These publications can reach congregations and people in the pews, inform them directly and also make them aware of other media outlets which particularly address the topic. The Church of Scotland website also tracks the changing situation worldwide, and records responses from committees or councils. Any nationwide, public campaigns are made known, as is news of Scottish people working overseas in other mission organisations.

The Moderator, the WMC Convener and the Area Secretaries have all been active in advocacy through the media to alert church members and the wider world to the suffering of minority Christians, and to appeal for attention and justice. They have responded quickly in issuing letters or press releases about the situation in India, Gaza, and Pakistan.

However, sometimes our partners do not want Western churches to raise the profile as they may be accused of being allies of the West and any advocacy from the West can also become counter-productive.

### **“Saying it” through financial assistance.**

Financial assistance represents an important expression of solidarity





and support. In Bangladesh, money is given to people who minister to Christian communities across the country, and for theological training. The Church of Bangladesh Social Development Programme receives funds for work with the poorest communities of all faiths, to provide clean water and micro-credit, and to raise awareness of HIV and AIDS and of human trafficking.

In Nepal, money has been directed towards HIV and AIDS awareness, conflict resolution programmes and local community initiatives to deal with the root causes of poverty. Funds are given to support theological training in Bible Colleges. In Pakistan grants have provided help for shelter and education for Christian girls, other school facilities for children of all faiths, technical training, prison chaplaincy and drug rehabilitation/training. The WMC has given funds for Israel/Palestine through the Near East Council of Churches, the Middle East Council of Churches, Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Centre, the YWCA, the Anglican Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza and the Bethlehem Media centre. Money is given towards the education of young people in East Jerusalem and in Jaffa, for subsidising accommodation for clergy and church members in the Jerusalem Guesthouse and the Scots Hotel in Tiberias and for finding employment for Christians through the Centres. At the request of our partner churches, money has been sent quickly from the Asia and Middle East area committees for relief in crisis or emergency situations. Cyclones Sidr and Aila in Bangladesh, the dislocation of villagers from Swat in Pakistan, and the persecution in Orissa, India, have all prompted immediate giving.

### **The need for greater awareness**

When a former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom referred to the two historic religious traditions in Israel/Palestine, (Judaism and Islam), local Christians, whose roots are just as deeply embedded in

that land, regarded this as typical of Western ignorance of their existence, let alone their plight. Partner churches consistently speak of the Western media's lack of attention to situations they face. Even more disappointing for many of these partners is the lack of awareness within Western churches. Above all other support, they ask for the prayers of their fellow Christians, and fear that where there is little or no knowledge, there will be a corresponding lack of prayer and support.

The World Mission Council acknowledges the challenge of helping the whole Church of Scotland to grow in awareness of the difficulties and dangers faced by fellow Christians in places of opposition and persecution. Through much greater awareness, fellow Christians in minority situations are better supported, and Christians in the West can be better inspired by the example of those whose faith carries a high cost.

### **Sources of information about minority Christians**

The World Mission Council uses its regular print publication WM and its weekly email Update to keep congregations informed of partner churches and others who are subject to discrimination and/or persecution. Further resources are available from organisations which have developed a specialist ministry in this area. These organisations will visit churches and church groups to share their own experiences and stories and, around the church, raise the profile of minority Christians.

### **What can the World Mission Council and Kirk Sessions do as a response to this report?**

*"Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something*

*to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you came to look after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me"*

Matthew 25:34-36.

### **1. Pastoral and practical support**

Whenever Church of Scotland congregations have formal or informal links with Christians who face discrimination or persecution, their support and encouragement can make a significant difference. Christians in minority situations often feel isolated and forgotten; therefore contact from other churches can be a real encouragement and blessing. Advice might sometimes need to be taken as to how to pursue these relationships with sensitivity and not to endanger the very people we are seeking to support, and contacting the World Mission Council for guidance in such scenarios would be welcomed. Twinings between churches abroad and Scottish congregations are encouraged by the World Mission Council.

### **2. Be informed**

The various organisations listed in this report provide a considerable amount of information via magazines and websites.

### **3. Pray**

"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." (Tennyson) Possibly the largest organised prayer effort is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP), which happens worldwide every November. It focuses above all on intercessory prayer and practical action on behalf of persecuted communities of the Christian faith, and also encourages prayer for the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it.

The significance of prayer is seen in the story of Maryam and Marzieh, two young women who were imprisoned in Tehran's Evin prison after being arrested in March 2009. Maryam and Marzieh were both from Muslim families and had become Christians. They were arrested, their apartment was searched and Bibles confiscated. Neither woman had committed a crime under Iranian or international law. At a hearing of Tehran's Revolutionary court in August, the two women were ordered to recant their faith, which they refused to do, and so they were sent back to prison. They were released from prison in November 2009, and a recent report said: "In an amazing answer to our prayers, Maryam Rostampour and Marzieh Amirizadeh were released this week after 259 days in prison. They send their thanks to you for praying and supporting them, 'Words are not enough to express our gratitude to the Lord and to His people who have prayed and worked for our release.'"

#### **4. Writing letters**

A number of agencies (see resource list) keep a record of such Christians, and supply appropriate contact information along with advice as to how to write to people imprisoned for their faith. Every letter sent is important: it can lift the morale of the incarcerated individual and make prison authorities realise that there is international concern about the case. It can take only minutes to write a short note or send a Christmas card to a prisoner, but the ramifications of this simple act can be very powerful.

#### **5. Lobbying/Advocacy**

The power of lobbying should never be underestimated, and there are numerous campaigns, such as Campaign for Burma or the Inclusive India campaign, which invite people to lobby on behalf of Christian

minority groups. Making elected representatives aware of concerns regarding overseas matters is always valuable, and such communication, especially from a considerable number of people can inform and influence government policy.

#### **6. Kirk Sessions**

Kirk Sessions should make the situations of minority Christians around the world an important part of their regular business, educating church members about persecution and discrimination endured by their fellow Christians, ensuring that these situations are remembered in prayer, encouraging advocacy on their behalf, and demonstrating solidarity in practical ways. They may also, if they are not already involved in a twinning arrangement with an overseas congregation, look seriously at exploring this possibility with a congregation in a country where Christians are subjected to persecution and discrimination.

#### **7. Support for partner churches**

Whenever a partner church finds itself persecuted or discriminated against, the World Mission Council should take positive action, whether by sending visitors to that church to strengthen publicly the support that is given, or by campaigning vigorously on its behalf both to the government of that country and through campaigning organisations, both Christian and secular.

#### **8. Inter-religious dialogue**

It is imperative that alongside any advocacy on behalf of Christians who face discrimination and persecution there is a corresponding respect for the religious traditions of other people. Many partner churches in minority situations are convinced that one of the greatest needs of the 21st century is for growing, constructive dialogue with

the Muslim Community. Churches in the Middle East speak of the need for understanding and respect between all three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Ill-considered advocacy that, often inadvertently, brands all members of a given faith community as persecutors can contribute to the polarisation which is part of the wider problem.

It is important to eschew any appearance of a partisan approach which is concerned only for fellow-Christians and unmoved by discrimination or persecution being experienced by other religious communities. To stand clearly on the side of justice, it is necessary to advocate religious freedom for all. It is the furtherance of this principle which is the best weapon with which to fight the discrimination and persecution currently being experienced by minority Christian communities.

### **Let us not be silent**

*"The greatest sin of our time, is not the few who have destroyed, but the many who have remained silent". (Martin Luther King)*

The World Mission Council offers this report to the General Assembly in the hope and prayer that the Church of Scotland may –

*"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of those who are destitute. speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy." Proverbs 31: 8-9.*

In prayerful and practical solidarity with those of the Body of Christ that suffer most, the whole Church will be strengthened, the world will be better served, and God will be glorified.

## **Useful Resources**

### **Books:**

Day to Day with the Persecuted Church – 365 DailyReadings by Sovereign World International in cooperation with Open Doors.

Non-Muslims in Muslim Majority Societies, edited by Kajsa Ahlstrand and Goran Gunner.

Eyes of the Tailless Animals: Prison Memoirs of a North Korean Woman, by Soon Ok Lee.

Operation World, by Patrick Johnstone.

Secret Believers, by Brother Andrew.

On the Side of the Angels, by Joseph D'Souza and Benedict Rogers.

Modern Saints and Martyrs, by Caroline Cox and Catherine Butcher.

### **Magazines:**

Connect and Encourage

Barnabas Aid

The Open Door Magazine

Release International

### **Websites:**

[www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worldmission](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worldmission)

<http://anglicancommunion.org/acns>

[www.asianews.it](http://www.asianews.it)

<http://www.barnabasfund.org>

[www.csw.org.uk](http://www.csw.org.uk)

[www.opendoorsuk.org](http://www.opendoorsuk.org)

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

[www.steadfastglobal.org](http://www.steadfastglobal.org)

[www.awm.org](http://www.awm.org)

[www.interserve.org](http://www.interserve.org)

## NOTES

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