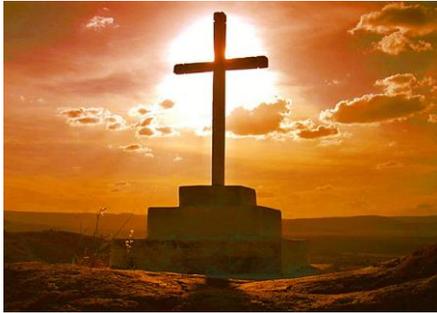


Walton Churches Partnership



WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

January 2019

MONDAY

False Accusation

Christians face persecution through false accusations that can lead to imprisonment and violence, and which are also used to bar believers from politics and public life.

The threat of being imprisoned on trumped-up political charges is used as way of punishing and intimidating **Iranian Christian** converts. Iranian Christians from Muslim backgrounds are frequently detained under political charges and falsely accused of crimes such as threatening state security.

Since legislation was amended in 1986, Christians in **Pakistan** have become very vulnerable to being falsely accused under their country's notorious 'blasphemy law.' Many have spent years in prison and some have been sentenced to death. Although no one of any religion has been executed under the law, several accused Christians have been murdered by zealous Muslims. Whole Christian neighbourhoods have been attacked by angry mobs after some of these accusations.

False accusations are also used to intimidate church leaders, and others in high profile positions, and can swiftly end careers. Many churches are too poor to pay their pastors, so they often support themselves with other work.

Reading: Matthew 5:44
Luke 6:27

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, across the world, many of Your people face increasing restrictions, persecution and pressure. We think of our brothers and sisters in regions where they are a disadvantaged minority, despised by the majority religion, in countries where they are displaced by conflict and war, and in Western contexts where intolerance is growing.

We ask, for them and for us, grace to obey Your command to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. Help us to walk in Your ways and glorify Your peerless Name, blessing those that curse us and repaying good for evil.

Facts:

- **Bangladesh** – June 2018 – the 22 year old son of a pastor was falsely implicated in a local murder, and arrested. The pastor's house, and church, was torched.
- **Turkey** – a US pastor was imprisoned on false charges, and faced 35 years in prison for “committing crimes on behalf of terror groups” and “espionage”. Through diplomatic intervention, he was downgraded to ‘house arrest’. A court case is pending.

TUESDAY

Spread of extremist violence and teaching

The twenty-first century has seen a considerable intensification of extremist violence. Radical Islam has gained a foothold and spread in various parts of the world, as militant terrorist groups seek to establish Islamic caliphates. A process of radicalisation is also taking place in many Muslim-majority countries, as extremist teachings spread, often with the help of Muslim missionaries from the Middle East. Politicians may compete to prove their Islamic credentials to the voters, and thus policies and laws become Islamised. For Christians, this means suffering more intolerance, more restrictions and more violence.

The Islamist terror group Boko Haram is spreading out from **Nigeria** into **Northern Cameroon**, killing and kidnapping, with Christians their primary target and many tens of thousands of Christians have fled their homes as they advance, burning villages and slaughtering their inhabitants.

In **Somalia**, where Islam is the state religion, Al Shabaab militants murdered three Christians in an attack on a primary school compound in north-east **Kenya**. Their repeated targeting of Christian teachers seems to be part of a deliberate effort to disrupt school attendance, making children, as young as nine, more vulnerable to recruitment by the terrorist group.

Reading: Acts 5:41

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we pray today for our Christian brothers and sisters who live in places where they must risk arrest, imprisonment, beatings and even torture if they teach or preach about You, Your saving death and mighty resurrection.

If it is Your will, we ask that You deliver them from such persecution. But if you allow them to be persecuted as You Yourself were, please give them strength to endure suffering, and love to forgive their persecutors.

May they rejoice, like the apostles, because they have been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Your Name.

Facts:

- **Egypt** – Young Christian women and girls kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam.
- **N.E. Nigeria** – Aug 2016, Boko Haram's new leader declared a change in strategy. Formerly attacking Muslim communities, the terrorist group now focus on bombing every Christian church possible and killing Christians. They believe that there is a Western plot to Christianize their country, and that charities providing aid are part of the plan.

WEDNESDAY

Suppressing the faith of the next generation

A highly effective way to destroy the Church is simply to make sure the next generation grows up without faith or knowledge of the Gospel. In recent years, children of Christian parents have been increasingly targeted by governments in several countries with the apparent intent of preventing them from learning about Christianity.

Since 2011, the government of **Tajikistan** has prohibited anyone under the age of 18 from taking part in public religious activities, a restriction seemingly designed to stop children from Christian families from growing up in their faith.

China has banned children from entering churches in several provinces since 2017, and strictly enforces a law against teaching Christianity to children.

In Communist **Cuba**, Christian children can be denied meals in government schools and parents who have tried to bring their children up in the Christian faith by home-schooling have been prosecuted. But these are not the only difficulties that Christian children face. Where Christians are a persecuted minority, children always suffer. At school they may be marked down or failed in their exams, they may face pressure to convert to the majority religion and in some cases they even face violence at school.

Reading: Matthew 19:14

Prayer: Lord Jesus, who said, “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them”, we ask Your blessing on Christian children living in places where the law bans them from going to church or learning about You. May these little ones in Tajikistan, parts of China and elsewhere learn to love and trust You.

May they grow in faith, grace and knowledge. Grant wisdom to their parents and church leaders to know how to teach, guide and inspire them to walk closely with You and to endure the harassment and persecution they may face at school.

Facts :

- **North Korea** – Kim Jong-Un encourages people to worship him. His grandfather used the structure of Christian worship to create the state ideology. So the Ten Commandments have become the Ten Principles of the Kim dynasty;
- In **Vietnam**, small Christian groups are forced to join larger state-registered denominations who have compromised on religious practices in order to gain registration.

THURSDAY

Restricting access to the Scriptures

Faith comes from hearing (Romans 10:17) and authoritarian governments always seem to recognise the power of God's Word, with many seeking to restrict access to the Bible and Christian literature. Countries like **Saudi Arabia, Cuba and Iran** have severe restrictions on owning and distributing Bibles.

In several Communist countries, the Bible is viewed as a subversive text. On 3rd November 2013 **North Korea** executed some Christians who had been caught in possession of a Bible.

When five Christians were arrested in the Phin district in **Laos**, in December 2017, a local official said Christians were "not allowed to teach from the Bible or to spread their religion to others, because Christianity is the religion of Europeans and Americans."

Today in **China**, the government only allows a certain number of Bibles to be printed each year and they must be distributed through registered churches. In 2018, the authorities clamped down on on-line selling.

Access to the Scriptures is problematic in many countries in the Former Soviet Union. When police raided a church service in **Tajikistan**, in June 2017, they confiscated all Bibles and Christian literature, with eyewitnesses reporting that officers tore books out of the hands of the congregation.

Reading: Romans 13:1-2

Prayer: Lord God, we thank and praise you that Your Church in **China** is growing and that Christians are continuing faithfully despite growing persecution and restrictions, especially for those in the unregistered “house churches”.

We pray that You, who are the Alpha and Omega, will give wisdom to Your people in China and guide their efforts to improve relations with the government without compromising their faith. Help them to remember that there is no authority except from You, and those which exist are established by You.

We ask this in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ

- **China** – registered churches have to remove crosses from their buildings. Christian symbols/ornaments have to be removed from homes. Gatherings of 5+ people prohibited;
- **In North Korea, The Maldives, Libya, Morocco, and Uzbekistan** it is illegal to own a Bible. Anyone found with a Bible may face life imprisonment, torture, or even death;

FRIDAY

Hindering fellowship, teaching and worship meetings

This insidious type of persecution attacks the faith of Christians and isolates believers by forbidding or hampering Christians from meeting. Until July 2006, it was completely illegal for Christians to meet together in **Saudi Arabia**. Now it is supposedly permitted in private homes but even those meetings are sometimes raided by police.

A very practical way to stop Christians meeting together is to prevent them from having anywhere to meet. Registration requirements for church buildings are a significant barrier to Christians freely gathering to worship and pray in a number of countries. This used to be a very serious issue for the Christian community in **Egypt**.

Other countries have seen the opposite trend. In **Indonesia** a law introduced in 2006 requires applications for places of worship to be supported by signatures from 60 local non-Christians households, fuelling Islamist opposition to churches. More than a thousand have been closed or demolished since the legislation was introduced.

Government-coordinated opposition to Christian places of worship is a serious problem in **Sudan**, where the Islamist government has bulldozed multiple churches in an apparent effort to eradicate the Christian presence in the country.

Reading: Philippians: 4:7; Revelation 7:17

Prayer: O God, our Lord and Creator, we lift up to You today the loved ones of Christians who have paid the ultimate price for their faith in Your Son Jesus Christ. We think of the families of the 20 Egyptian martyrs and one Ghanaian who died in 2015, whose bodies were returned to their homeland this year. May their grieving families know the peace that transcends all understanding. We lift up to You also the survivors and relatives of those who died in many other violent attacks on Christians around the world. Heal them, O God, and wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Facts :

- **In Algeria**, authorities have closed down churches on the premise of Health and Safety concerns;
- **China** has closed down many churches, alleging they have violated building codes.

SATURDAY

Inciting mob violence

Incitement of mob violence against Christians occurs in many countries. Attacks on Christian individuals or communities are often closely connected to other forms of persecution, such as false accusations, hindering of fellowship and faith meetings, or as a reaction to conversions and sharing the Christian faith.

In November 2016, police in riot gear marched into the desperately poor Christian Santal community in Gaibandah District of **Bangladesh**. Helped by local Muslims, they evicted the Christians and set fire to their homes. Three Christians were killed and at least 5,500 made homeless. Their land, which is near to a government-owned sugar factory, was seized to cultivate sugar cane.

Mob violence also occurs in Buddhist and Hindu cultures. Indian Christians suffer frequent attacks from Hindu extremists, while Buddhist mobs, often led by monks, have targeted believers in **Sri Lanka** and **Myanmar**.

In **Egypt**, actions by the government to grant official status to pre-existing churches have been met by mob violence. The typical police response is to arrest a number of Christians, along with Muslim perpetrators. Then Christians are forced to waive their right to legal action in exchange for “reconciliation”.

Reading: Daniel 2:21

Prayer: O God, who sets up kings and rulers and deposes them, we pray for those in positions of earthly power who use that power to persecute Your faithful followers. Please reveal Yourself to them through your Son Jesus, who is the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

Soften their hearts. May they bow their knee willingly to You, receive from You wisdom, knowledge and discernment and learn to follow in Your ways of love and peace. Give us faith to believe that no human dictator or persecutor is too hard for You to change.

In Jesus' Name we ask this.

Facts :

- In **Pakistan**, in Feb 2018, a Muslim mob blocked roads in **Lahore**. Urged on by messages from mosque loudspeakers, they attacked Christian homes, claiming an alleged blasphemous message on social media. 400 Christian families fled their homes.
- In September 2017, a Muslim mob attacked a small village in **Egypt**, again in retaliation to a Facebook post. Homes, cars, businesses were destroyed and several people were injured.

SUNDAY

Converts

In many countries, conversion to Christianity can mean a loss of family, friends and livelihood. In some countries the law sets out punishments such as whipping or even death. But more often violence will come from family, community or radical organisations.

A convert in **Somalia** is likely to be murdered by Al Shabaab, who, around 2006, declared their intention of killing every apostate from Islam in the Somali capital, Mogadishu.

In **Iran**, a Christian's conversion from Islam is not legally recognised and they are regarded as enemies of the state and frequently imprisoned on political charges.

Converts are also increasingly under attack and pressure in the West. In the UK, Nissar Hussain and his wife Kubra, Christian converts from a Muslim background, have suffered an onslaught of violent attacks, threats, verbal abuse and false accusations by the Muslim community, leading to serious health issues and forcing them to move from their home in Bradford.

In **Sweden and Germany**, a large influx of refugees from Syria and other Muslim-majority countries, is also importing the patterns of persecution of the regions they fled from. In Stockholm last year, a new Christian convert from Syria was stabbed by fellow asylum-seekers on the same day he was baptised.

Reading: Isaiah 61:1
Hebrews 13:3

Prayer: Our loving God and Father, we pray for Iranian Christian Ramiel Bet Tamraz, his parents and friend, who are facing the trial of imprisonment for owning Your Name. Strengthen them in mind and body to endure hardship, even solitary confinement, in the notorious Evin prison.

May they know Your close presence as their merciful Lord who binds up the broken hearted and proclaims liberty to the captives. As bound with them, we pray that forthcoming appeals will bring about their early release.

Facts :

- The number of countries with an official death penalty for apostasy (**the abandonment or renunciation of a religious or political belief or principle.**) from Islam will have doubled in the first two decades of the 21st century from five to ten.

Small Group Bible Study

For the study this week we suggest using Daniel Chapter 3. For millions of Christians around the world, their situation is not unlike the one facing Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Perhaps some of us too have felt in a small way that sense of being forced to 'swim against the tide'. Let's study that famous story and allow it to speak to us afresh, and also to inform our prayers and support for The Suffering Church around the world.

Introductory discussion starters:

- Have you ever been asked to do something which went against your conscience? Share your stories...
- How was your faith involved?
- What was the outcome?

READ Daniel chapter 3 together

Context: These three Jewish friends of Daniel are in exile in Babylon. They are flourishing in their new roles within the Babylonian king's administration, which brings both personal rewards (see 2:49) and the jealousy of others. Despite their success, they face a moral and spiritual dilemma which reminds them in the most dramatic way that they serve a different Lord...

Delving into the text:

Q1. For these three young men bowing to this image was their 'line' that couldn't be crossed. Why? And did they draw the line in the right place?

Q2. What do you make of their reply to Nebuchadnezzar in verses 17-18?

Q3. If someone you knew faced a similar dilemma, how would you advise them?

Q4. How much did King Nebuchadnezzar change as a result, and does that matter?

Applying to our world today:

Q5. Thinking about countries like North Korea where this sort of situation is very real, what should we pray for those facing these situations?

Q6. Is there other support we can offer?

Q7. What would things like mission and discipleship look like for such Christians?

Q8. How does their example inspire us today?

Wrapping up:

Take time to pray for Christians around the world facing these situations

Pray too for any in our churches also facing something similar, even if less dangerous

Is there one country or one organisation you could particularly support this year?