

The Persecuted Church in the World

Nine days of prayer for the hidden Church
and freedom of belief: 27 June - 6 July



Hidden Church

Imagine having to keep your faith secret. Let us go on a journey together...

When church becomes a secret, persecution is happening. It is when you cannot let anyone see your prayer, your worship, or your Bible being read. Imagine how hard that would make it to follow Jesus.

The Apostle Paul wrote that when one part of the Body of Christ suffers, every part suffers with it, and if one part is honoured, every part rejoices (1 Corinthians 12:26).

It has been estimated that around 360 million Christians – or one in seven – around the world face persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Earlier this year, the Church of England's governing body, General Synod, unanimously backed a motion of support – proposed by Phil Dooley in Wolverhampton Deanery and promoted by Lichfield Diocese GS reps– for the persecuted church and for all experiencing persecution because of their faith.

Christians are being urged to pray and offer other practical help to those facing persecution ahead of an international conference to promote the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) hosted by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in London on 5 and 6 July.



Sunday 26 June is dedicated as the first day for nine days of prayer prior to the conference. This day is also 'International Day for victims of torture'.

There are more resources for churches, schools, chaplaincies and fresh expressions online at lichfield.anglican.org/hidden-faith

We urge you to join us in praying each day through this period.

You may like to light a candle each day as you read about someone somewhere who has only Christ to hold on to.

Penny Allen, Revd Damian Feeney and The Rt Revd Dr Michael Ipgrave, Bishop of Lichfield; Lichfield Diocese General Synod Representatives
- House of Laity, House of Clergy, House of Bishops respectively

Here is the wording of the motion that was passed unanimously:

'That this Synod request that:

- (a) the Church of England not only pray for the persecuted church, but that its dioceses offer support to link dioceses where the church is facing persecution,
- (b) organisations and dioceses consider joining the UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum to work with Christian and other groups in addressing the persecution of Christians and the global violation of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB),
- (c) churches consider using resources such as the practical Everyday Faith – Hidden Church during the Thy Kingdom Come novena between Ascension and Pentecost, 26 May – 6 June,
- (d) in the run up to the International Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief (The Ministerial FoRB) Conference 5-6 July 2022 individuals and groups consider hosting information

events, prayer groups and fringe events using the Toolkits for Places of Worship and Schools and Communities on the End The Persecution website,

(e) churches and individuals contact their MPs in advance of The Ministerial FoRB, asking them to raise awareness of the persecuted church, and other FoRB violations, suggesting some of the actions in the FoRB Toolkit,

(f) that Her Majesty's Government implement in full the previously accepted 22 recommendations in the Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians, published in July 2019, by the third anniversary of the report in July 2022, as indicated within the report, and

(g) the next Lambeth Conference address the issue of the persecution of Christians.'

Day 1: North Korea

For the persecuted church, fires are crucial. They make great hiding places. Imagine you had to hide your Bible to keep it out of sight should your house be searched. Digging a pit in the ground, placing your Bible in a plastic bag, and burying it, then lighting a fire over it, will keep it safe.



North Korea is one place where this happens. Faith is under constant surveillance. Between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians, as well as many others, languish in camps. Secret faith thrives.

We cannot easily light a fire in our lounges but we can light a candle. Find one and light it. Say a prayer for those who hide their Bibles, that they may keep their faith strong.

Read this verse from your Bible for them:

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

John 1:5

Pray...

Loving Lord, we pray for those in darkness, that they may see the light of Christ surrounding them. May Christ's love be known in the camps, by our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Day 2: Syria

When symbols of hope come crashing to the ground in times of war, worship is difficult. Syria endured invasion by Isis. Broken crosses leaned at odd angles on the tops of church roofs. Places of worship were damaged. People scattered. Churches had to be rebuilt.

You may like to take some twine, two twigs and make a cross. Perhaps you could do this with others. Say a prayer holding the cross. Then untie it. Disassemble it. Pretend it

was never there. Think what it is like to destroy a symbol most dear to you; to almost deny your faith. We can have crosses in our homes and not worry about anyone finding them.

Light a candle. Pray for families who have had to flee and for the rebuilding of churches and communities.

“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

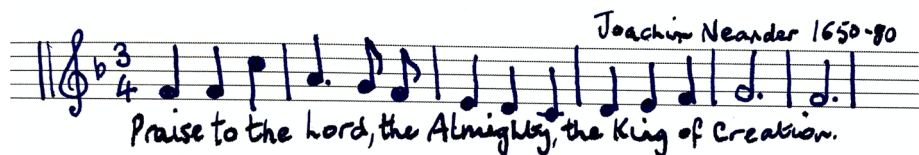
Isaiah 12:3

Pray...

Lord God, we pray for those rebuilding faith and community. May they draw strength in knowing the depth of Christ's love for them. Help me to know what I can do.



Day 3: Sudan



In Sudan, new Christians who have left another faith find singing at home dangerous. Their faith has to be kept secret. If their family finds out they will be put under house arrest.

Sudan's persecution happens at a social level, but Sudanese Christian and Muslim religious leaders are making great changes. They have declared that they will promote peace and freedom of worship among different faiths. It will take time for this to filter down to a local level. When you light your candle, think of those who cannot sing out loud. Sing your favourite hymn or worship song in a whisper or even try to sing it without making a sound. Maybe do this with others.

"What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops."

Matthew 10:27

"Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Isaiah 12:6

Pray...

Lord, we pray that new faith is strengthened. Let silent worship be the loudest praise.

Day 4: Nigeria

Tirham* lives in Nigeria and has experienced extremist Fulani herdsmen who target Christian villages. Imagine what it would be like if people walked into your personal space to do unspeakable things.



Tirham set up a Trauma Centre to offer counselling, prayer and support for 16 Christian women every week. She carried the great cost of supporting women who could not share what they had seen with their families.

In the photo above is a handmade petition of 16,000 fabric squares put together by the Christian charity Open Doors UK. It was handed to the UK Government to seek an end to sexual violence in conflict. Each square says "I see you" to women persecuted for their faith.

You may like to follow the links listed on page 15 of this booklet to find similar initiatives. As you light a candle, pray for Tirham and all traumatised, persecuted women.

"But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me."

Micah 7:7

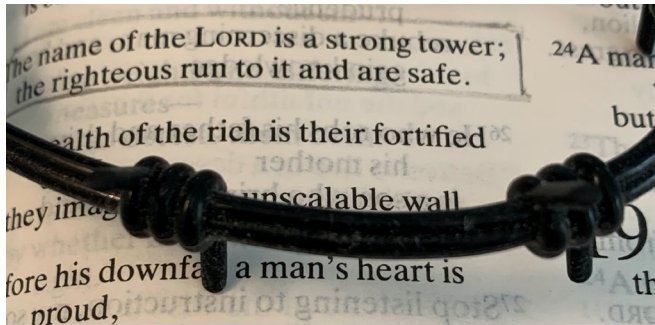
Pray...

Lord God, we pray for peace and hope for Tirham and all traumatised, persecuted women.

*Tirham's name has been changed to protect her identity

Day 5: China

The Church in China is growing with an estimated 90 million Christians. Churches have to be state-registered, with sermon content and congregations monitored by technology.



One 60-year-old pastor is in prison because his church is unregistered. He told a charity helping him that, in his prison cell, persecution strips everything away until it is just you. All he has to do is get to know Christ.

Having no Bible in a cell makes memory recall vital. Try recall for yourself. Find a verse, write it on a scrap of paper. Memorise it. Encourage others to do the same. Destroy the paper. Recall it later and pray for someone who would have to do that.

As you pray, remember all Church leaders, and those of other faiths, who languish in prison cells. As you light a candle, recall your verse.

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are safe.”

Proverbs 18:10

Pray...

Lord, may the light of Christ be known in prison, in the cells. Give those imprisoned the courage to stand firm and hold on to Christ.

Day 6: Afghanistan

Afghans who follow Christ must hide their faith. They cannot be seen to be meeting together. There are no physical church buildings. They worship either in a house church or by going out to a place in the desert where they will not be found.

Most Christians in Afghanistan do not own a Bible. The danger of owning one is extreme. They may hide a Bible in the roots of a tree. Try to hide your Bible well not just tucked under the sofa. Perhaps wrap it in a duvet and push it deep into a cupboard. You could even put it in a plastic bag and hide it in the garden if you have one.

Then go to it during the day and read it without anyone seeing you. Close it. Re-hide it. Say a prayer. Make sure no one sees you.

“Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them.”

Psalm 91: 14-15



Pray...

Lord God, We pray for your protection for those who love you. May they find shelter under your wings; may they know your faithfulness and hear you answer their call.

Day 7: Sri Lanka



An English priest met a mum and her two children in local woods while praying Morning Prayer on her phone. Spotting that the mum was doing the same, she said, "I'm doing what you're doing", and we laughed.

As they talked, the mum said that her relatives in Sri Lanka were suffering. They were Christians. COVID-19 had brought jobs to a halt. They were hungry today and she couldn't do anything.

When people queued for government aid in Sri Lanka, the family found themselves at the back and got little to eat. Food distribution at worship centres meant Christians got overlooked.

The priest was able to suggest organisations that might help. COVID-19 food insecurity like this is common across many nations and you may like to consider supporting an organisation that provides food packs for people like this family. Perhaps share this story about being at the back of a food queue with someone today. As you light your candle, pray for all who suffer persecution because of COVID-19.

"Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' And he laid his hands on them and went on his way."

Matthew 19: 14-15

Pray...

Lord God, give me the compassion of heart to take practical action to see change happen.

Day 8: Solidarity and Advocacy

Easter services at three churches in Sri Lanka were bombed in April 2019. Father Nishantha Cooray, a Franciscan who helped minister to the injured and dying from those attacks, said: "People need healing. We are accompanying them through their pain. They have lost so much but they are still full of love for the Lord."

A pastor from one of the bombed churches spoke at the parliamentary launch of the 2020 World Watch List, Open Doors' annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution. Rehman Chishti MP (pictured above), then the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion and Belief, told the pastor, "We stand by you."



Sharing stories like this with our MPs helps them to understand our concern and encourages them to try to bring about change. One person's 10-minute meeting with her own MP led to two debates on Christian persecution. I never thought this would happen. Perhaps think about writing or speaking to your MP.

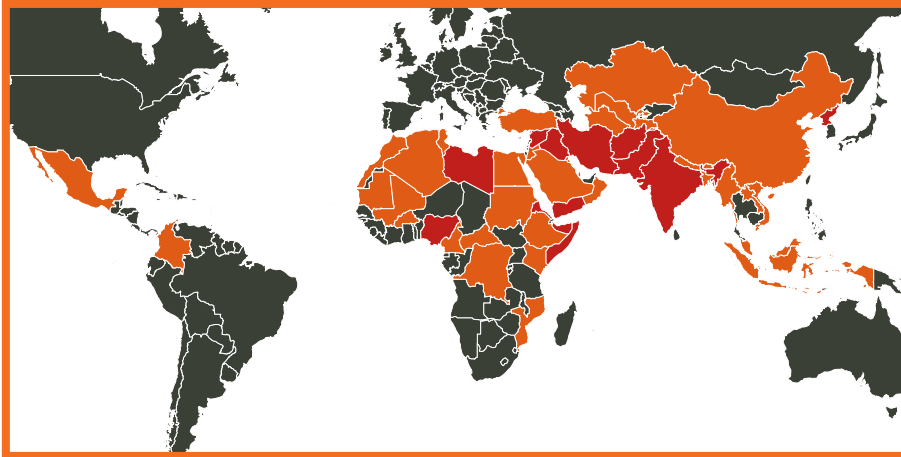
"Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."

Luke 24:39

Pray...

Lord God, May those who hurt know your healing touch. Give us courage to speak out for those who hurt and have no voice.

Day 9: Praying across the world



Open Doors UK World Watch List 2021 top 50 most persecuted nations

Over these nine days we have looked at seven nations, six of which are on 2021's World Watch List. Choose five countries or one of your own, then pray for them:

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Another way to pray is to paint the name of each country on five stones and scatter them around your home. Perhaps put one by the kettle, one in the bathroom, one by the phone, one by the front door, one on the sofa.

Think of the individuals whose lives have touched you: perhaps think of Tirham, or the Sri Lankan pastor, or the Chinese pastor. Pray for those in positions of power, the MPs, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion and Belief.

Pray...

Lord God, we pray for persecuted Christians across the world. We pray for people of all faiths and none who face persecution. May we have the deep compassion and love of Christ for your "Hidden Church".

Open Doors Watch List for 2022 top 50 most persecuted nations (from worst to least) (opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list)

Afghanistan | North Korea | Somalia | Libya | Yemen | Eritrea
| Nigeria | Pakistan | Iran | India | Saudi Arabia | Myanmar |
Sudan | Iraq | Syria | Maldives | China | Qatar | Vietnam | Egypt
| Uzbekistan | Algeria | Mauritania | Mali | Turkmenistan | Laos |
Morocco | Indonesia | Bangladesh | Colombia | Central African
Republic | Burkina Faso | Niger | Bhutan | Tunisia | Oman | Cuba |
Ethiopia | Jordan | Democratic Republic of Congo | Mozambique
| Turkey | Mexico | Cameroon | Tajikistan | Brunei | Kazakhstan |
Nepal | Kuwait | Malaysia

What will I do next?

Perhaps make a decision to pray, speak out, or act in some way and write that down. Give yourself a time limit.

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Follow up

You may like to find out something more about the persecuted church. Here are some links to follow:

Aid to the Church in Need

www.acnuk.org

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

www.csw.org.uk

Open Doors UK

www.opendoorsuk.org

Freedom of Religion and Belief Ministerial Conference

www.endthepersécution.uk

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Earlier this year, the Church of England's governing body, General Synod, unanimously backed a motion of support – brought by members from Lichfield Diocese – for the persecuted church.

Join us, in the run-up to a governmental conference in London on 5 and 6 July 2022, in praying for Christians in some of the toughest countries in the world this June and July, and the politicians and diplomats who can influence governments around the world.

- Find out more about the conference at endthepersécution.uk
- Use this booklet or our Psalms bookmark or other resources from lichfield.anglican.org/hidden-church
- Join with local Christians to pray together: find your local church at AChurchNearYou.com:

The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) will host the global summit to promote freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in London. The conference follows previous freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) events held by the US and Poland, and will boost global efforts to tackle persecution, driving collective action in promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities around the world so that everyone, everywhere can practise their own religion or belief freely. It will play a key role in shaping the network of liberty the UK, as a fierce champion of freedom, is building around the world.



The Diocese of
Southwark



This booklet has been adapted with gratitude to The Revd Sue Thomas and Southwark Diocese who originally wrote and published it as part of their participation in 'Thy Kingdom Come.'