Bringing joy to their world

After her father was gunned down for preaching the gospel, Daniela is on the road to healing in Colombia.
You can be there through the Open Doors Frontline Partner monthly giving program.

By giving $30 a month you can provide your persecuted family with critical support and emergency relief.

BE THERE FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS, NO MATTER WHAT.

By joining the Frontline Partner program through Open Doors, you’ll join the largest on-the-ground network of support for persecuted Christians in the world.

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About Open Doors
For over 60 years, Open Doors has worked in the world’s most oppressive countries, empowering Christians who are persecuted for their faith.

Open Doors Core Values
We are part of the Body of Christ; a people-to-people people
We are persecuted church-driven
We are people of the Bible
We are people of prayer
We live and work by faith
We are devoted to Jesus Christ and His commission
We are motivated solely for the glory of God

ON THE COVER
Daniela and her brother, Sebastian, are still healing from their father’s murder in Colombia. Following Jesus can be dangerous for many believers—and the risk impacts kids even more. Read more on page 15.

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COVID-19 and persecution: A perfect storm

By Julia Warren

Starve to death or convert.

Throughout the world, this is the choice for persecuted Christians struggling to survive in the midst of the COVID-19 global crisis.

In parts of the world like Southeast Asia, West Africa and the Gulf region, many believers are day laborers, living hand to mouth. Others in full-time ministry rely on church donations to survive.

“When the pandemic began to hit country after country, we started to receive phone calls and other pleas for help,” Open Doors’ Asia team director says. “We quickly realized that in many places, Christians were in a very vulnerable position. No income for the day often means no meal that day. Starvation became a real threat.”

Layered on top of the economic impact is the persecution Christians, especially converts, say they are encountering from the state, as well as local leaders in tribal areas. Open Doors has learned thousands of Christians throughout the world have been left out of government relief efforts and marginalized because of their religious choice. We have reports from Christians in Bangladesh, Malaysia, India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Nigeria and the Gulf region where believers are facing these types of injustices.

Most of the affected Christians come from a Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist background, says Sam*, an Open Doors local partner in Southeast Asia. “Their families and communities don’t agree with their new faith and won’t provide any help in these circumstances,” he notes. “[Christians] are not able to receive the support because when it goes to the villages, the village head normally discriminates against the Christians. They say: ‘Well, you’re Christian. You became a Christian, so you are not part of this support.’”

He says the economic impact of the pandemic has created a perfect storm of persecution. “Christians aren’t getting the support that people who follow the majority religion get,” he says. “In fact, sometimes it’s even worse. For example, in Bangladesh, extremist Muslims may tell them, ‘We will give you food if you come back to Islam.’”
Quarantines have also created difficult situations in the northern and Central Highlands regions of Vietnam, especially in rural areas where Christians are striving to put food on their tables. Although the country has already lifted its nationwide lockdown, the government still distributes food aid through the local villages to families with meager incomes or those who lost their jobs during the lockdown. But when 18 Christian families—a total of 107 people, including senior citizens and children —went to gather their portion, local authorities told them, “You are not on the list.”

Adds one Open Doors field worker in Asia: “The stream of messages we get in which Christians tell us they are starving and don’t receive help because of their faith is simply endless.”

And it’s not just Asia. Our teams have witnessed how Islamic extremist groups in Africa work to deliver food and services to recruit members and build credibility, making it more likely people will join them in times of great need.

“If the persecuted church is not strengthened and supported at this time, then the enemy will not sleep to dismantle and take advantage against believers,” says Yasin A*, Open Doors’ East Africa director. “For many new, weak and troubled believers, it would be difficult to stand strong.”

In India, we’ve heard similar stories. For Christians in Hindu villages, the pandemic has exacerbated an already difficult situation. Open Doors staff workers Samuel* and Heena* detail the scenario:

“Imagine you’re a Christian family in a Hindu village. It’s very likely the villagers are socially boycotting you. They don’t allow you to buy from the local shop or draw water from the well. To live, you must go to nearby Christians’ homes or travel to villages where Christian opposition isn’t so strong. Now your village is in lockdown. You’ve lost your income. Government aid is being distributed to the local village committee who’s already boycotting you. So they won’t give you the food, even with a food ration card.”

Wherever possible, Open Doors has responded with tangible help. Despite all the restrictions, increased monitoring, threats from groups hostile to Christians and the health risks, God has opened the way for Open Doors workers and partners to give aid in many places where Christians experience persecution.

“The reason we are called ‘Open Doors’ is because for God, no door is shut,” Open Doors’ Asia director says, “and the global Body of Christ came through as well. The response in prayer and giving from supporters around the world is amazing. God has used them. Thanks to Open Doors’ supporters, there will still be a church after coronavirus in many places where its existence was threatened.”

“If the persecuted church isn’t strengthened and supported at this time, then the enemy will not sleep to dismantle and take advantage against believers.”
New believers surprised by Bible gifts in Malaysia

They had never held a Bible.

“Thank you! This means everything!” After 23 believers were baptized in Muslim-majority Malaysia, Open Doors partners gave them their very first Bible in their local language.

One of our partners, Anna*, had the privilege of helping distribute the Bibles. She shared: “Many had never seen a physical Bible, let alone held one. Some were even in tears. They are very poor and cannot afford to buy a Bible.”

But the distribution of God’s Word didn’t stop there! Two more local partners requested two full boxes of Bibles to distribute to families they had met earlier in the year. “Thank you for the Bibles. We managed to distribute the two boxes to many families here. Many were excited to receive them,” they shared.

Our team was able to give children their very first Bibles. Anna recalls how their eyes lit up and they swung into action: “The moment it was in their hands, they started to read it and asked our partners to help them search for the different verses they liked.”

One of the new believers, Reina*, received a USB drive with the Bible on audio in her language. Because of your support, this young mother is now teaching her three illiterate sons about Jesus. Reina had to hold back tears when her youngest son asked her who Jesus was.

“You’re a blessing to me,” she says. “I’m invisible to my neighbors, and yet God sees me and helps me through people like you.”

“I’m invisible to my neighbors, and yet God sees me and helps me through people like you.”

—Reina, a new believer

2,000 Christian families received food packages in Iraq

Open Doors continues to walk alongside the global Church during COVID-19. With your help, 2,000 Christian families in Iraq received desperately needed food packages.

Iraqi church leader Father Poulos from the village of Bashiqa shared with our ministry partners: “The members of my church are going through a particularly hard time. They came to the church for help. No one else is supporting us, but you did.”

Your support is strengthening the church remnant in Iraq.

Pray that God’s Word will permeate the hearts and lives of these new Christians.

*Representative names and images used for security reasons
In one day, Abigail Geoffrey lost her husband, most of her possessions and the safety of her home and farm. She and her husband were working their fields when the shots rang out, forcing them to run in different directions. The next day, Abigail learned he didn’t survive the attack on her Christian village.

The Muslim Fulani militants razed the village, forcing the young widow and her one-year-old daughter to seek refuge in a makeshift camp a few miles from their home. Then COVID-19 struck. The strict lockdowns left her with no way to earn a living. When our team met Abigail in the camp, food was scarce; fights for the little food available were common. She had little hope for survival.

Because of your generosity, Abigail now has food for her daughter for the next three months and she has returned to her home. We also gave her fertilizer to boost the farming that now rests squarely on her shoulders.

“My heart is filled with joy,” Abigail says now. “I usually have sleepless nights, worried about where our next meal will come from, how I will get fertilizer for my farm. Then God made a way. I am grateful to the people God used to provide for me. May He bless you and open more doors for you.”

Pray for comfort, protection and continued strength for Abigail and her daughter—and so many widows caught in the crosshairs of persecution violence and the pandemic.
In Bangladesh, Christians are recovering from a spate of disasters that have struck the country, including COVID-19 lockdowns, a super cyclone and severe flooding. When Cyclone Amphan struck in May, it left a trail of destruction—lives lost, damaged houses, uprooted trees, destroyed crops and livestock.

The disaster came at a time when Bangladeshi believers were already suffering from the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns, including discrimination in aid distribution. They heard that help was coming from the government, but nothing came. One church leader shared: “This crisis has gone from bad to worse. The people are depressed, frustrated and have lost all hope. Many are living under open sky. The believers are praying together, every day, for God to protect them and to give them food.”

At just the right moment, our local partners arrived to give them food packs, as well as tin to repair their homes. One of the believers, Robiul, said: “This is unbelievable. I did not get any help from others. This is the first time. We prayed to God to help us.” His voice broke and his eyes filled with tears as Robiul expressed his thanks. Several other believers shared their gratitude, and we wanted to bring their words to you:

- Mafuza Khatun, who has a family of five, said: “We need food every day, but we do not have work. We don’t know when the situation will be normal again. We are suffering a lot. We live from hand to mouth. Thank you for this support. This food will help us to survive. Only God knows what would have happened if you did not come. Pray for us.”
- “This is one of the happiest moments in my life. I am very happy. God bless you a lot,” says Sufia Begum, mother of a family of six. “Now I do not have to worry about food for one month. This is a great blessing for my family. The storm and COVID-19 have turned our lives upside down. We lost many things and suffered a lot.”
- Another believer, Nasima Akter, shared: “Now, I can repair my house and we can live in there, safely. This will help my family very much. Now, it is rainy season, almost every day it rains. We cannot sleep well. Thank you for your kind heart for us.”

Mahmad* and his family left Islam two years ago to follow Jesus and essentially became second-class citizens in their Central Asian country (we cannot disclose their country for security reasons). Like persecuted Christians around the world, they were caught in the COVID-19 economic crisis with no way to earn money. When they were promised work in the country’s capital city, Mahmad and his extended family of 12 uprooted their lives to find employment. But they soon learned they had been lied to. For 10 days, they slept on the street, including their children.

When one of our on-the-ground Open Doors team members learned about this family, they immediately went to work, securing housing and providing food and medicine. One of our partners even took the children to a doctor for treatment. Our team is also looking for income-generating opportunities.

Through your support, this family of believers is on the path to restoration, strengthened in their faith. One of the women in the group, Ayshe*, even came to faith in Christ from Islam because of what she saw. Listen to her testimony: “When my relatives prayed, their God answered and He sent other Christians to take us from the terrible situation,” she says. “Now I know Iso Masih (Jesus) is a Savior for all people all over the world and personally for me, too.”

Pray for Mahmad’s family as they build a new life and shine the light of Christ.

Pray with Bangladeshi believers as they walk through crisis upon crisis.
our supporters would back our venture into the area of relief. We called the appeal “Project Loving Kindness” and asked for $250,000.

In record time, no less than $2.6 million was received. That was 1998, and since then relief has been a part of our ministry.

Still, the rules are strict, and we do relief only as a last resort, so as not to compromise our essential call and identity. Essentially, it comes down to two principles:

1. If we don’t give aid, they [the persecuted] will die.
2. If we don’t distribute the aid, they will die.

In the first scenario, relief NGOs simply do not know of, or are unable to reach, the persecuted community that is starving or struggling with overwhelming physical needs. This may be due to their geographical remoteness, or their underground and invisible profile, or both. There are persecuted Christians that only we in OD know about, and often cannot talk about. They might be tribal Christians in the central highlands of Vietnam, or a group of believers who converted from Islam in a strongly Islamic country. We are their only hope of physical as well as spiritual survival.

The second scenario is more common. The need is known, and the aid is available, but other organizations do not have the connections to distribute it effectively. Because we are a presence ministry, we are intimate with the local churches and leaders. We know how to make sure aid gets into the right hands, utilize the non-governmental channels and know who to trust at the local level. This is vital in places like the Gulf region, for example. When floods devastated large parts of this area in 2012, Christians were known to be suffering because assistance never reached them if it went through government or NGO channels. We distributed the aid through our church channels. Otherwise these Christians would never have received water, a blanket or a tent.

In this year of COVID-19, the need has arisen to do a lot more relief but, again, according to these two principles. In so many countries, Christians form the most vulnerable minority because of their faith. They might be the cooks, domestic servants, streetsweepers or other day laborers—and during the crisis, they were all fired. Most live in countries where there is little government aid available, so if groups like Open Doors and its partners do not step in, large numbers of these vulnerable Christians will starve and die.

Never has there been a year like this one to make this “last resort” tactic so central to our strengthening work.
Persecution Watch

WHAT’S HAPPENING WITH GOD’S PEOPLE, STANDING STRONG FOR HIM IN PLACES WHERE FOLLOWING JESUS CAN COST THE MOST

EGYPT

Christians held at gunpoint, abducted

A video caught on CCTV shows us what persecution looks like today in Egypt. It’s shocking and sudden—and it’s done openly, without fear of consequences.

In the video, Bakhit Aziz Georgi is in his small shop. Suddenly, a masked man in black aims his gun at the 68 year old, forcing him to follow.

Outside the shop, Bakhit’s 35-year-old nephew, Youssef Samaan Girgis—father of three young children—sees the abductors dragging his uncle to their pickup truck. When Youssef tells them to stop, the kidnappers ask him for his ID card. “Christian” is clearly printed on his card. The men grab Youssef too.

While the attackers move Youssef and Bakhit to a waiting pickup truck, Mariam, Bakhit’s 21-year-old daughter, comes running out of the family house located above the store. “When I found my father in the pickup truck, I pleaded with the abductors to let him go,” she says. “But they bluntly told me no. Then they drove off and the only thing I could do was cry.”

This isn’t the first time the Christian family has been devastated by violence of this sort. One of Bakhit’s sons, Osama, was kidnapped in July 2016. The family hasn’t seen him since.

“After the kidnapping of my brother, we felt that we were in danger, but my father refused to leave the area until my brother would return,” says Ramzy, Bakhit’s other son. In this region of Egypt, several believers identifying as Christians have been specifically targeted.

Praise God! Two weeks after the incident, Youssef was dumped in the desert, alive. But Bakhit and Osama remain missing.

The police aren’t investigating the case. Osama’s abduction was also reported to the police, but the authorities paid no attention to his disappearance either. Another family member says this might be the reason the kidnappers dared to come again.

“There was nothing to deter them,” this family member says. “If action had been taken against the kidnappers in the first incident, the second incident wouldn’t have taken place. And if the police also do nothing in this recent incident, it will [happen again to] other Christians.”

To view the video, go to opendoorsusa.org and click on Stories.

PRAY FOR THE SAFE RETURN OF BAKHIT AND OSAMA—AND FOR THE PROTECTION OF ALL CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT WHO ARE TARGETED FOR FOLLOWING JESUS.
The photo below is telling. It shows the lengths Christians in northwest Vietnam go to follow Jesus—and the level of persecution they face for leading others to Him. This is Chien* with his wife and two sons, standing in what’s left of their house. While he and his family were in another village leading a Bible study, their community burned it down—angry that Chien was sharing about Jesus and had started a house church in another village.

Chien once believed in spirits. But in late 2018, a family relative shared the gospel with him. Later, his family came to faith, too. They were the first Christians in their village. In early 2019, he went to a city to take a short Bible course. Then, he returned to his village and started to evangelize to his community. The village chief threatened to expel him and his family. But this did not stop Chien from proclaiming the gospel in another village where he was able to start a house church.

Although Chien’s ministry was in another community, the people in his village were still furious about it. When Chien contacted the local authorities to file charges, they ridiculed him and told him: “Pray to your God! He will take care of you!”

PRAY WITH CHIEN’S FAMILY AS THEY CONTINUE TO PLANT THE GOSPEL.

Almost daily, we hear reports of Christians detained, arrested or imprisoned in Iran. A recent report reflects the intensifying and strategic efforts Iranian police are making to ambush and arrest believers. Over two days, Christians were rounded up and arrested across three cities in Tehran, Karaj and Malayer. Dozens more were ordered to provide their contact details and told they would be summoned for questioning.

The first arrests took place when 10 intelligence agents raided the home of a recent Christian convert, where around 30 Christians had gathered. Everyone was taken to the building’s parking garage that had been turned into a quasi-interrogation room. The agents then read out a list of six names written on an arrest warrant. The officers then handcuffed, blindfolded and drove the six believers to their homes in Tehran and Karaj to search for Bibles and communication devices. Some Christians and their non-Christian family members were beaten. On the same night, three Christian converts in Malayer were called and told to report to the police the next day for questioning.

The arrests were part of a coordinated effort that involved an informant who infiltrated the group and earned the trust of believers. The individual accompanied the agents in their raid on the Tehran house church and even stood next to the judge as he read out his bail demands.

This is the kind of deception and persecution that Christians in Iran continually face.

PRAY WITH THESE BELIEVERS AND PROTECTION OVER HOUSE CHURCHES IN IRAN.
As COVID-19 continues to magnify the challenges facing the North Korean people, some have been reaching out to their family members in South Korea and other countries, asking for help.

Since recently arriving in South Korea, believer Sonyong Lee* has received several letters from her mother still in North Korea. Recently, Sonyong shared one of her mother’s letters—her words are a sobering indicator of the worsening situation North Koreans are facing in the isolated country during COVID-19.

“I understand your difficult circumstances as you try to settle down in your new life in South Korea,” Sonyong’s mother wrote. “But it is a very difficult moment here. Please help me one more time.”

Sonyong’s mother had received money from her in March; it clearly wasn’t easy for her to ask for help again.

Brother Simon, Open Doors’ coordinator for ministry to North Korean Christians, shares details about the current conditions: “There’s little food to buy. And prices have quadrupled. It will cost you multiple months’ salary to buy a kilo of rice. Even corn is very expensive. The border with China is closed, which prevents most trade and smuggling activities.”

The country is also reeling from COVID-19 deaths—what North Koreans call “the ghost disease,” Brother Simon says. “People can be sick without knowing it,” he says, adding that “sudden deaths” are happening because they are already malnourished. “Some even just fall dead on the ground. It’s an invisible killer.”

Even after the brutal civil war that led to genocide and the subsequent declaration of independence, South Sudan, the newest country in Northeast Africa, can still be very dangerous for Christians. The report of an attack in South Sudan’s Jonglei State offers a glimpse into what our brothers and sisters are facing.

In late July, gunmen raided the Christian-majority village of Makol Cuel and an Anglican church, claiming 23 lives; most were women and children. After destroying the church compound, the attackers moved through the village, setting fire to homes and kidnapping at least six children.

Majority-Christian Jonglei State has long been known for clashes between ethnic groups, but recently communal violence has increased with attackers carrying military-grade guns. The violence has displaced more than 60,000 people—creating another humanitarian crisis in a country emerging from six years of civil war.

“The killing is terrible,” remarked an Anglican church leader who serves in the same area.

*Representative names used for security reasons
IN INDIA
Teenager beaten, disowned for following Jesus

In India, persecution is no respecter of age. Christians of all ages are discriminated against and attacked for their faith. The COVID-19 pandemic has made things even harder, especially for young Christians like 18-year-old Nikhil* who came to Christ after hearing about Jesus from a pastor.

Secretly, Nikhil began to attend church. But his family found out and “hated” him for it, Nikhil shares. During the lockdowns, the hatred only grew. His brothers beat him. His father ridiculed him and finally said, “You have brought complete shame to my name in the village. Leave my house.”

Nikhil found refuge in his pastor and now stays in the church hall. Open Doors’ local partners provided groceries to sustain both Nikhil and the pastor, who was struggling to feed his family due to COVID-19 lockdowns.

“I thank God so much for my pastor and all of you who supported me,” Nikhil shares. “My own family disowned me, but now you are my family. You stood by me in my desperate, painful situation.”

Nikhil’s pastor explains that Nikhil’s persecution stems from cultural stigma: “Nikhil comes from a high caste. Christianity is falsely regarded as a foreign religion, which only poor people would embrace in return for money or material benefits.

“It was embarrassing that a boy from such a high caste would choose Christianity. His brothers also threatened me several times, accusing me of polluting his mind.”

Recently, Nikhil’s father called to tell him if he gave up his faith, he would get his share of land and houses, but he plainly refused.

“I will never leave Jesus,” he says. “I count it joy to suffer for Christ.”

PRAY WITH NIKHIL, HIS PASTOR AND YOUNG BELIEVERS IN INDIA WHO ARE PERSECUTED BY THEIR FAMILIES.

LAOS
Believers forced into jungle to worship

The forest is sometimes the only safe place for Christians in Laos to gather. Though the leaders of their Buddhist village have threatened to kick them out of their homes if they continue to hold worship meetings, the teens in this photo gather regularly to pray, study the Bible and encourage each other.

Because they can no longer worship in their village, they must find ways to come together and worship under cover of the jungle. “Please pray for them,” our local partner in Laos asks. “Although they are safe for now, doing the worship outdoors is still risky.”

PRAY WITH THESE YOUNG MEN THAT THEY WOULD BECOME STRONGER IN THEIR FAITH EACH DAY. PRAY FOR THEIR COMMUNITY TO COME TO KNOW THE JESUS THESE YOUTH HAVE FOUND.
“Would I go to prison for my faith?”

It’s not a question we usually ask ourselves during the Christmas season. Christians are rightly focused on coming together and celebrating the birth of Jesus. Yet, it might be worthwhile to spend a moment thinking about this as we gather with friends and family this year.

I used to think my answer to this question was a straightforward “yes!” Then I started meeting people who had actually gone to prison for talking about Jesus. I heard stories of miraculous interventions and of individuals struggling with depths of despair like nothing else in their lives. Stories of amazing revelations and heartbreaking loss, often intertwined.

Would I willingly go through what they had gone through in order to obey God’s call on my life? After all, in many cases, these people could have chosen to be silent and avoided the consequences. Some of their fellow Christians did just that.

Today, I still don’t really know the answer to the question. I’ve decided I won’t know the answer to this unless one day I have to actually answer it for myself. What I do know is I can’t forget those who are serving out their calling behind locked doors and barbed wire fences.

Those like Deacon Zhang, a Korean Chinese minister sentenced to 15 years in a North Korean prison for ministering to North Koreans crossing into China, or 89-year-old Patriarch Abune Antonios, held incommunicado for over 13 years in Eritrea for refusing to excommunicate members of his church under government orders.

The Zhang and Antonios cases are well known. Most are not. In Vietnam, for instance, dozens of small church leaders remain locked away. I met the wife of one who watched with her young children as her husband was arrested and dragged behind a police motorcycle for refusing to stop his church planting work.

There are two reasons we should remember these brothers and sisters. The first is for our own sake, because taking even a moment to think on this causes us to examine our own lives, consider our priorities and ask ourselves how much we really value the gift that is Jesus.

The second reason is because it reminds us there is much we can do for our imprisoned family members. We can pray. We can advocate.

Despite all the turmoil you read in the news, our elected officials in Washington D.C. can still use their influence to hold perpetrators of persecution to account. Open Doors USA works with many of these officials every day, and we know that when we advocate, we can improve the conditions and treatment of those who are suffering. We can give them that little bit of encouragement that comes from knowing you are not forgotten. Sometimes, we can even secure their release, often years earlier than if we had remained silent.

This Christmas, take a moment to consider the question, “Would I go to prison for my faith?” Ask your friends and family what they think. Take a few moments to pray for all those in prison for their faith—and in doing so, you may not only learn something about your own life of faith, you’ll almost certainly be making a difference in the lives of others.
After her father was gunned down for preaching the gospel, Daniela is on the road to healing in Colombia.
The floor of her simple house is elevated, because it regularly floods in Caucasia, the city in northern Colombia where Daniela and her family live. The roof has holes that allow the rain to leak in, and Daniela and her mother and brother have to avoid the puddles.

But it’s still better than where they came from.

It’s safer than the town La Caucana, where Daniela and her family are from—but it’s still not safe. Even here, there’s a lot of violence and hearing gunshots is not uncommon.

And yet, it’s still better for the family than the place where Daniela’s father was murdered because he followed Jesus.

Targeted for changing lives

When we meet Daniela, she has her hair up in a ponytail and wears a black-and-pink polka dot dress with a matching headband. “Dani,” as her friends and family call her, looks at us curiously, her big eyes examining the strangers in her home to take her picture and hear her story, and I can see a little shyness when she seeks shelter in her mother’s arms. But a welcoming smile doesn’t leave her face. Seeing her like this, she looks like any other 12-year-old girl you’ve ever met. She shouldn’t have a care in the world, but she knows better than most what it’s like to pay the price for following Jesus.

Loving Jesus and living for Him can be dangerous in parts of Colombia, where drug lords and rebels—who are often the same people—operate like lawless warlords. They recruit vulnerable young people to do their dirty and dangerous work for them. And they need customers.
Daniela and her family are still reeling from the loss of Plinio. They are seeking healing and trusting in God’s goodness, even as they continue to mourn.

Loving Jesus can be dangerous in parts of Colombia, where drug lords and rebels operate like warlords.
Please, pray for Dani and her family:

- Pray for basic things like food, a home and security for them. It’s difficult for a single mother in Colombia to keep providing for her family.

- Pray for Sebastian and Dani’s education.

- Pray for the spiritual well-being of the children.

- Pray for healing from the grief of the loss of Plinio. Pray they would grieve well and feel the presence and peace of God.

- Pray for their safety.

‘It would be good if she could show more emotions’

I ask how the children deal with the death of their father. Alba shows a cellphone clip of Sebastian crying uncontrollably on the bed. “My son is very expressive,” she says. “He’s very attached to me and his sister. He cries and often says things like, ‘I don’t want anything to happen to you, because I’d be left alone.’ On the other hand, [Daniela] is less expressive. She cries a little but doesn’t express her feelings. She cries and tells me how much she misses her dad.”

“Can we talk to Daniela?” I ask. “You can be with her, of course.”

“You can talk to her, but perhaps without me,” Alba says. “It would be good if she could show more emotions, and she will hold back when I’m there.”

We spend time with the family, and Daniela opens up. She says she likes to draw, that she feels inspired when looking at the sky and at the trees, and that when she grows up, she wants to work as an illustrator. She also says, despite moving to a new city, her grades at school have not changed and she is one of the best students in her class.

And then I ask: What is the hardest thing for you about being in a new place?

“When I think of …” Suddenly, her eyes brim with tears. She looks down, shields her eyes from us, then looks up to finish her sentence. “Cuando pienso en mi papa.”

*When I think of my dad.*

Our photographer doesn’t hesitate. She sits next to Daniela and embraces her.

“Do you want your mom?” we ask.
She nods and we bring Alba into the room, who hugs Daniela and kisses her, her own eyes wet from tears as well. Yet, she is thankful Daniela has finally expressed her emotions, even if it’s just a little, for a fleeting moment. It’s a start.

Daniela tells us she wants to continue, and Alba says it’s OK. I ask Daniela what she thinks her father would have liked for her to do in the future. “Well,” she says without hesitation, “to be a great person and to follow in the ways of God.”

Since Christmas is near, we ask how she’ll celebrate and what this season means to her. “I believe celebrating the birth of Jesus is a moment of joy,” she says. “Usually we celebrate together as a family; we’ll cook and eat together. Christmas for me is being with my family. I also remember a Christmas we spent with the church brothers and our family, simply enjoying and talking.”

Daniela has heard we have invited her and her family to spend some time at the Open Doors Children’s Center in Colombia. We want to give them a break and help them get away from the sadness and isolation, to receive trauma care and ... to celebrate Christmas. She is excited.

**Armed policemen at the corner**

It’s about time for all of us to leave. The neighborhood is curious to know the identities of these strangers visiting the Salcedo family. We suddenly notice armed policemen, dressed in green camouflage uniforms, at the corner of the street. They are here to protect us—which means the risks of staying here have increased.

The family packs their bags, and we drive to the airport. For the first time in their lives, Daniela and Sebastian will see their country from the sky. Daniela seems a bit nervous. “I’m anxious,” she says. Yet, when they run to the waiting area at the gate, we see big smiles on Daniela and Sebastian’s faces. “I was wondering if the plane would crash,” Daniela said after the flight, “but in the end, it felt good and safe to fly. The land looked small; everything looks beautiful from above.”

Two plane rides and a long journey over land later, we arrive at the Children’s...
A place to heal

“I didn’t expect so many people [to greet us],” Daniela told us later. “I was so surprised to see all of them, singing a welcome to us. It made me feel so good. I was really happy to be surrounded by so many loving people.”

Over the next few days, it seems the heavy fog Daniela was walking through was lifted. She and her family spent four weeks at the Center—four weeks in which she could be a kid. Four weeks where she didn’t have to bear the burden of grieving her father on her own. “I felt good for the first time in a long time and I was able to explore new places, new cities and new people,” she says. “I managed to do many things, Center, a project that gives permanent shelter to many children of persecuted Colombian Christians. The Center is also sometimes used for short stays for families like the Salcedos. It’s 11 p.m. and already very dark when we pull into the Center’s parking area.

All the staff and all the children are waiting at the entrance. They clap and sing. A big banner reads “Bienvenidos, familia Salcedo.” Immediately, some of the Center’s staff members walk toward Daniela, her mother and brother. The Salcedos receive flowers and hugs.

Daniela’s face shows her thoughts. You can see her thinking: They don’t know us. Why did all of them come for us?
When we ask her if she has a final message for those who care about her and other persecuted children, she smiles and replies confidently. Her words echo the life of her martyred father:

“Sé valiente y fuerte, sigue confiando en el Señor.”
“Be brave and strong, keep trusting in the Lord.”

Targeted by drug gangs for sharing the good news

In the region where Plinio lived with his family, two other pastors have also been killed by illegal armed gangs. The reason was the same: preaching the gospel in their communities. These local drug traffickers do not want people to become Christians because it means they will be less likely to work for them and take orders from them. Additionally, Christians’ work in the community to help people overcome addiction lessens the number of people who will be regular customers of the gangs. In other words, in their eyes, followers of Jesus threaten their way of life.

That’s why these lawless drug traffickers look for ways to stop the gospel from spreading. Many Christians are threatened and, in the case of Pastor Plinio, the threats are sometimes carried out. He paid with his life.

These illegal groups also recruit children to work for them by helping to sell drugs. They’ll tell poor children they can have a better life; if that doesn’t work, they take children with them by force.

Open Doors seeks to help the families affected by this reality. We work to provide psychological and pastoral support, financial aid and ongoing livelihoods. In some of the most difficult cases, Open Doors provides a home and education for children at the Children’s Center in Colombia.
‘Jesus is always with you’

By Christopher Summers

In Bangladesh, Christian children can experience brutal discrimination and bullying. But thanks to your gifts and prayers, for one day they can be reminded of Emmanuel—God with us.

Bijli* stands in the yard of her school, drawing a picture in the dirt with a stick. She draws a figure who looks like her—a girl with short hair and a dress. Then she draws other children, friends for the girl in the dirt. One holds the girl’s hand. Another has a ball to play with. They all have big smiles.

She glances up at the other children in the playground. The scene looks like her dirt drawing—except in real life, no one is playing with her.

She notices a couple girls whispering to each other and staring at her. Bijli quickly looks down, but it’s too late—they’ve started walking toward her. She scans the yard for their teacher, but Bijli can’t see her.

“What are you doing?” one of the girls asks.

“I’ve just been drawing ...” Bijli stammers, gesturing to her drawing in the dirt. One of the girls stamps on it with her foot, making the smiling faces disappear.

“My mother says your family are infidels,” another girl says.

“We’re not infidels,” Bijli says, starting to cry.

“Are you saying my mother is lying?” The girl pushes Bijli over, and she lands on the ground where her drawing once was. The girls laugh and run away. Bijli stays on the floor, tears rolling down her face.

‘You are not the same as us’

Bijli’s family is one of just a few Christian families in their village of 50 houses in Bangladesh. Her grandfather has received biblical training through Open Doors partners, and now he’s a church leader.

Her father, Badol*, knew his family’s decision to leave the traditional Muslim faith of their village and follow Jesus wouldn’t be easy. “I was a little bit scared that the Muslim villagers would not want to do anything with me,” he says.

Sadly, he was right. “No one wants to talk, communicate and associate with us,” Badol says.

The rejection and isolation are especially hard for 10-year-old Bijli. “My friends don’t want to play with me. They push me,” she says. Maya*, Bijli’s mother, explains that sometimes Bijli comes home crying because her “friends” have attacked her.
When COVID-19 hit Bangladesh, Bijli and her family had to stay home during the lockdowns—Bijli couldn’t go to school, and Badol couldn’t go out to work.

It was a challenging time for the family. “I had no work for around two months, and it was really difficult to manage the needs of my family,” Badol says. “We live from hand to mouth, so no work means no food.”

He did not receive any support from the government, even though many people in his village received relief. Sadly, there have been many incidents of Christians not receiving government aid in Bangladesh—it is often distributed by the village authorities, who will discriminate against those they don’t like.

Your prayers and support enabled Open Doors partners to provide the family with emergency aid. Badol says: “For the first time, I received relief. I am very happy.”
I have the privilege of stuffing and sealing letters to Open Doors donors. My technical skills and addressing skills are limited, but God can use anyone. I live within 20 minutes of Open Doors USA.

**WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME AWARE OF THE PROBLEM OF PERSECUTION AGAINST CHRISTIANS?**

My first knowledge of Christians being persecuted began in 2015 when ISIS was attempting to take over Iraq. Most of [the] Nineveh [Plains] (near Mosul) were destroyed when the terrorists were able to destroy Christian churches and forced the [residents] to flee.

**WHAT’S A PLACE YOU HAVE A HEART FOR?**

North Korea’s communist dictators have persecuted the Church to probably the greatest extent of any country in the world, imprisoning and torturing any public believers in Christ. I am grateful their government is unable to stop Christian radio broadcasts.

**HOW DO YOU SERVE PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS THROUGH OPEN DOORS?**

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**WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ENCOURAGEMENT YOU’D OFFER TO OTHERS ABOUT SERVING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?**

We can all pray for both individuals and churches that have been and continue to be persecuted, as well as give some of our God-given resources that Open Doors faithfully provides to hurting Christians that need God’s Word and support due to severe persecution in many areas of the world.

**WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME AWARE OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?**

I’ve known about Christian persecution since my teenage years. But one day in prayer, about two years ago, Jesus showed me His persecuted bride, His Church, enduring great affliction, alone and forgotten. There was no one to bear witness to her pain. This powerful experience has stayed with me.

**WHAT’S A PLACE YOU HAVE A HEART FOR?**

Somalia! I am in awe of this small but mighty group of believers. When one meets God—really meets Him—His beauty and love are irresistible. This is the reason our brothers and sisters willingly face extraordinary risks to leave dead religion and embrace a living relationship with Jesus.
Courage is the next chapter of the Church

By David Curry,
CEO of Open Doors USA

Looking at the landscape of the church at large, there’s no question that faith—and its free expression and practice—is more opposed than ever before. With greater brutality and sophistication, governments like China, Iran, North Korea and others oppress anyone who investigates or follows Jesus.

Likewise, the cancer of religious extremism spreads to attack and harm people of faith in India, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. The coronavirus has also heralded a new era of relief discrimination toward Christians, making their already bad situation even worse. Following Jesus isn’t safe.

Considering all of that, you might think I’m frightened or depressed about the future. But in fact, it’s just the opposite. More than anything, I’m encouraged the Church is waking up to the challenges before us.

I believe the renewal of courage is the next chapter in the story of the Church. Indeed, the entire story of Jesus and His followers is one of courage.

The courage that compelled Christ to the cross, united believers in Acts 2 and commissioned Christians to the ends of the Earth is the same courage that runs toward closed borders instead of away from them, that rebuilds 10 churches from the ashes of one, that sustains the persecuted church through unimaginably difficult days. That’s the courage that infuses the Church born from the Holy Spirit, empowering us to rise to the challenge of the coming days.

I believe courage is rooted in hope—that even in days full of bad news, the Holy Spirit equips the Church to keep going. This is the hope that God is turning even the worst of situations into good as part of His master plan to make all things new.

But this hope comes with the responsibility to unite, as the Body of Christ, in prayer and solidarity with one another. This is hard work—but the same Spirit that works in the places where it’s hard to follow Jesus also works in us.

The persecuted church gives me hope. They are, to me, evidence that Jesus equips His people to grow and flourish through the hardest of circumstances. Their testimony reminds me that I, too, can flourish in stress and in pain, through the Holy Spirit and the presence of Jesus.

Will you renew your commitment to the persecuted church by joining me in praying with them today? Ask God to touch your heart for a country, group or person who is paying a high price to follow Him. And as you press further into prayer and advocacy for our suffering brothers and sisters, may God restore your hope and renew your courage for the coming days.

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 9:9–10).
Devotional

READ & REFLECT

But in those days, following that distress, 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And He will send His angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

— Mark 13:24–27

“I pray there will be no terrorists in this world, so we can live in peace,” 11-year-old Fakhri says, when asked what he wants for Christmas. Fakhri has lived in Erbil, Iraq, since his family fled from Mosul seven years ago, escaping ISIS.

Fakhri’s pastor, Father Zachariah, aches to return to Mosul as well. But Mosul is still too dangerous, and there are too many radical Islamic influences there to return at the moment. So, they will celebrate Christmas here in Erbil, along with the other children and families who fled. It is the seventh year they will celebrate Christmas away from their home.

Situations like these remind us of the brokenness in our world. Fakhri likely knows there will be terrorists this year, and long after. And if extremism is ever chased out of Iraq fully, it will crop up somewhere else, ready to harm more followers of Jesus.

It seems hopeless.

But the lesson of Advent is that God breaks through hopelessness—in both His coming as a baby and in His future coming as a conquering King. This passage in Mark reminds us that someday, Jesus will come back in power and glory, and will save all of us. He will save His people from ISIS, from violence, from disease, from terror, from the threat of constant fear. Fakhri’s Christmas wish is powerful because it reminds us of the ultimate reality promised by Jesus: the promise that one day, all of God’s people will live with Him in peace.

What prayer will you pray this year that reminds you of that reality?

PRAY

Lord God, we thank You for the prayers of Christian kids like Fakhri. We thank You for his courage, and for his willingness to ask for what seems hopeless—because he trusts in You to undo every wrong, and to make all things new. This Advent and Christmas, will You give us the grace to carry that kind of faith into our daily lives? Make us hopeful agents of Your Kingdom, secure in the knowledge that through Jesus’s life, death and resurrection, You have won the victory and given us hope no matter what. We pray for our family in the Middle East, that You would preserve them and strengthen them, and give them the peace of your Spirit this Christmas. We ask all these things through the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
Include persecuted Christians in your year-end giving!

Please share an extra gift to bless them—and enjoy tax and income benefits!

Here are some great gift ideas:

- **Donate stock, bonds, IRA distributions or other securities.** When you transfer stock, bonds and IRA distributions to Open Doors, you’ll get tax relief and help your persecuted brothers and sisters.

- **Give a tax-deductible cash gift.** Choose a project or designate “where needed most.” You may want to give a gift “In memory of” a loved one or “In honor of” someone special.

- **Fund a charitable gift Annuity.** You will receive the security of fixed payments for your lifetime backed by Open Doors’ assets and obligation to pay, and the assurance you will leave a legacy of help for the persecuted church.

For more information about these options or other planned gifts, please contact Karen Schneider at 800-659-5965, visit OpenDoorsUSA.org/PlannedGiving or email her at karens@odusa.org.
Text PRAYER to 32500
to download the Pray for the Persecuted App from Open Doors

Message and data rates may apply