Faith in the fire

Is there any hope for the Christians of Nigeria?
You can be there
through the Open Doors
Frontline Partner monthly
giving program

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you can provide your persecuted
family with critical support and
emergency relief.

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CHRISTIANS, NO MATTER WHAT.

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Features
12
Faith in the fire
Nigerian Christians like Hajaratu are under attack. But here’s how God is strengthening His people

17
A silent epidemic
Christian women and girls are doubly targeted for their faith—and their gender. This eye-opening report exposes the reality of violence against women who follow Jesus.

23
Doing Jesus’ work after persecution
David Curry reflects on the courage of persecuted Christians—and how they can inspire believers across the globe.

Departments
4
Point of View
“We are in the hands of God”

6
Impact Report
How you are changing lives

9
Persecution Watch

11
Updates from Capitol Hill
from Isaac Six

12
Spotlights
People who help through their time and talents

24
Spotlights

25
1 Question
What does Jesus’ death and resurrection mean to you?

26
Devotional
A monthly reflection on God’s goodness, and what He’s teaching through Scripture and the witness of the persecuted church

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.

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.

ON THE COVER
Hajaratu is a young Christian widow from Nigeria. The night Fulani militants attacked took so much from her. She survived the attack, but the gut-wrenching reality of life after that night has remained. Hajaratu is one of the many Christians who risk their lives every day to live out their faith in Jesus in hostile regions. Read her story on page 12.

ON THE BACK COVER
Back cover illustration created by Scott Erickson, Open Doors USA’s new Artist-in-Residence. Scott is a touring painter, performance artist and creative curator who mixes autobiography, aesthetics and comedic narrative to create experiences that speak to our deepest stories. Watch for Scott’s works of art—inspired by the persecuted church—in Presence magazine and on OpenDoorsUSA.org/ArtistInResidence.

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Presence magazine showcases the powerful stories of faith of persecuted Christians, while showing how God is at work through the united Body of Christ around the world.

Presencemagazine.com

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Pastor Jeremiah’s village was attacked in April 2020—and it’s part of a massive wave of violence against Christians in Nigeria’s Middle Belt. In this region, militant Fulani herdsmen are pushing their cattle through the regions where Christians have lived for generations. When these radicals attack, they do so with brutality, killing anyone in their path, burning down homes and churches to gain more land and wipe out the Christian presence in the region.

Pastor Jeremiah has the voice of a shepherd, gentle but firm, even as he describes the painful memories of the attack—and the lingering effects that still impact the Christian community. “We heard gunshots close to our vicinity,” Pastor Jeremiah says. “So, we told our women and children to go to the next town, while the men stay guard.

“About 15 minutes later, armed Fulani surrounded the town,” he says. It was impossible to protect the town against heavily armed men, so everyone fled. Some ran deep into the bush, others to the rocks and some tried to run to the next town. “The Fulani [radicals] shot at me while I was running,” Pastor Jeremiah says. Some of the Christians in the village didn’t make it out alive. The Fulani militants went from house to house, setting everything ablaze.

The next morning, after the militants had fled the area, Pastor Jeremiah and others returned to the village to survey the damage. “When we came back in the morning, all we saw was fire and smoke rising from houses and stored grains,” Pastor Jeremiah says. “Those who were around began pouring water to salvage their grains, to have something to eat, even for just a few days.” Layers of rubble, mudbricks, dishes and burnt corrugated steel were all laid in piles across the village. Homes stood naked without rooftops, and the mudbrick walls were pockmarked with black stains from the fires.

Pastor Jeremiah steps into his home, places his hands on the now-brittle walls and chips off some debris with his fingers. This kind of violent persecution is part of the Christian life for many believers in Nigeria today—No. 9 on the 2021 World Watch List of the most dangerous countries to be a Christian today. Even during the coronavirus pandemic, deadly attacks increased in the region.

Through this terrible attack, Pastor Jeremiah is still shepherding his people toward hope—reminding them they survived by the grace of God—and the Lord still has plans for them. Plans to bring glory to His name. “We should give glory to God. He is alive and will help us,” Pastor Jeremiah adds. “Just as a hen opens its wings to cover her young.”

The fear of more attacks always looms, but Pastor Jeremiah says the Christians here have never fought by carrying guns to kill people. “Even if we die, we are in the hands of God,” he says.

Open Doors helped Pastor Jeremiah and the other believers living around Kufana with critical support to buy food, medicine and materials to rebuild their homes—along with spiritual support and trauma care—to help encourage them in their faith and strengthen the church. “If you had not come, we would have suffered even more,” Pastor Jeremiah says. “Open Doors, on behalf of my people, we are saying, thank you.”

Thank you for your gifts and prayers that have helped Pastor Jeremiah and other believers stand strong in Nigeria, despite violent attacks.
What began as an ordinary day turned into a nightmare that will forever change the lives of families in the remote Christian village of Lembar Tonga in East Indonesia. That morning, 10 armed Islamic extremists entered the village and, in front of the villagers’ families, murdered three men. Another was burned alive in his home—reminding us once again of the extreme darkness believers face today.

The terrorists burned down six houses, a makeshift church and a Salvation Army building—sending believers fleeing for their lives.

Srikandi (see photo) lost both her husband and father. Her children watched the murder of their father and grandfather. Sam, one of our ministry partners in Southeast Asia, commented that as many as 25 children in the village had been traumatized by what they saw.

“The children are our biggest concern,” he said. “As soon as our Southeast Asia team heard about the attack, they rushed to the village to be present with the grieving and traumatized believers. Team members attended the funerals with believers, prayed with families and publicly expressed their commitment to walk with them through this darkness.

I see saddened in the eyes of the villagers,” a team member shared. “However, when they saw us, the villagers smiled.”

Sharing about the impact of our team’s quick mobilization into the area, Sam remarked, “Our presence is making a difference.”

thanks to your prayers and support, this church in west Nepal is now completed. At first, this church family met in a shed with cows and goats. When they tried to rent a room to meet, the local Buddhist community refused, saying the meetings would disturb them.

But persecution strengthened their resolve. Believers pooled their resources to buy a piece of land where they could build. They constructed the church out of bamboo and mud, only to have it destroyed in the earthquake that struck Pala in 2018. They had been meeting in their pastor’s home but outgrew the space as God added to their numbers.

Now the church has finished rebuilding, and the gathering space is even better than before, says the church’s pastor. “We are so grateful to Open Doors for providing us with financial assistance. We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude.”

Mahesh was also able to share the gospel to his oppressors: “I praise God that He was leading us the whole time,” he recalls.

Your support has also helped Mahesh and local believers start a small business making LED bulbs.

“I would like to thank Open Doors partners and supporters for thinking about such livelihood options, which help sustain our family and the local church,” he says. “Thank you so much.”

“Thank you so much.”

—Pastor Mahesh

Earlier this year, Open Doors partners were able to distribute food to North Korean believers. One of the recipients wrote a thank you letter—a sobering reminder of the situation our sisters and brothers are facing and the importance of bringing hope. She writes, “We are astonished by the love of our Father, who uses people from far away countries to give us these essential daily living supplies.”

She went on to share a beautiful prayer of praise for God’s provision and her petition to be used by Him:

“Lord, we thank You that we can sow seeds with tears in our eyes, while at the same time, we dream about the green pastures that Christ will lead us to.

We are grateful for all fellow workers we live and work with. Whether we live or die, we do it with our faithful fellow workers who walk faithfully on the same road as us. Please use us. We are Christ’s Army and want to bring the gospel to the ends of the world. We want to be Your witnesses and spread Your blessings.

Lord! We love You! Lord! Thank you! I will follow you until I die! Amen.”

Pray for provision and encouragement for our North Korean family. Ask God to give them signs of hope as they labor and live as His witnesses.
Myanmar youth meet Jesus at Christian children’s camp

Young Akit* recently decided to trust Jesus as his Savior at a children’s camp that Dan*, one of our ministry partners, runs in his home. Akit’s salvation story may sound familiar to you, but there are two distinctives:

Instead of celebrating their son’s faith decision, Akit’s Buddhist family may disown him.

And instead of a lively place filled with laughter and singing, this camp is full of silence.

That’s because Dan’s Buddhist neighbors are always prepared to file a case against the Christian camp under the guise of “disturbing the peace.”

“The children cannot sing and worship, they cannot shout and play, smile and laugh, because our Buddhist neighbors are ready to complain,” he explains.

But camp organizers persevered, focusing on bringing evangelism to the children. Akit and the other kids sat quietly in a circle while the volunteers taught the children through Bible stories. Coloring pages brought the stories to life.

“The children receiving salvation and believing in the Savior Jesus Christ is our greatest joy in this camp,” Dan shares.

Pray for these children—future leaders of Myanmar’s church. God, we ask you to continue to work in the hearts and lives of these young believers.

Cast out from their village, Ethiopian family is spared from starvation

Iris’s smile lights up the dark shelter where her family lives in northern Ethiopia. She and her husband Mulaken are Christian converts who were cast out of their village.

“Because of our faith, we are hated and isolated by our family and friends,” Iris says.

Their faith has also made it near impossible to survive in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because they follow Jesus, they have been unable to find work as day laborers and, like thousands of other believers struggling with intensified poverty, they were denied COVID-19 government food aid.

“There were jobs but not for me because people said, ‘We don’t want him,’” Mulaken says. “There were times I begged for food, soap and pay house rent.

“Instead of being provided food, they refused, two Christian families lost their livelihood as their families. They refused to deny Jesus—and extremists destroyed their fields.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, violence across sub-Saharan Africa actually increased in 2020. Some terrorist groups were targeting Christians—claiming that, “Allah punishes us all” with the “sword of the Earth.” A few days after the raid on Pemi, the group attacked at least three more villages in the northeast, including Garkida, Shaffa and Tashin Alade.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, violence across sub-Saharan Africa actually increased in 2020. Some terrorist groups even pledged to wage war against “infidels” like Christians—claiming that, “Allah punishes us all” with the pandemic because of the infidels.

Pray specifically for Pemi, Garkida, Shaffa and Tashin Alade villages. Ask God to bring peace in an area that has become such a target because His name is proclaimed there.

Persecution Watch

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

NIGERIA

Christians targeted in ongoing Boko Haram attacks

In northeast Nigeria, Christians are facing what feels like an ongoing attack on their lives, their churches and communities. Only a few months ago, simultaneous raids by the terrorist group Boko Haram on five Christian communities in southern Borno state resulted in numerous deaths, kidnappings, destroyed homes, burned church buildings and thousands of displaced believers.

In Christian-majority Pemi village, fighters with Boko Haram killed 11 people and abducted another seven, including a pastor. Fighters rode into the village in trucks and on motorbikes, opening fire indiscriminately on the community. They also burned down a church and hospital.

Pemi is located approximately 17 miles from Chibok, where Boko Haram kidnapped nearly 300 schoolgirls six years ago.

“Since 2018, virtually every two weeks, Boko Haram has been attacking Chibok, killing and abducting people,” said Nkeki Mutah, chairman of the Chibok community in Abuja. “They want to wipe Chibok out from the surface of the Earth.” A few days after the raid on Pemi, the group attacked at least three more villages in the northeast, including Garkida, Shaffa and Tashin Alade.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, violence across sub-Saharan Africa actually increased in 2020. Some terrorist groups even pledged to wage war against “infidels” like Christians—claiming that, “Allah punishes us all” with the pandemic because of the infidels.

PRAY SPECIFICALLY FOR PEMI, GARKIDA, SHAFFA AND TASHIN ALADE VILLAGES. ASK GOD TO BRING PEACE IN AN AREA THAT HAS BECOME SUCH A TARGET BECAUSE HIS NAME IS PROCLAIMED THERE.

EGYPT

Christian shop owners attacked with impunity

EGYPT

Christian shop owners attacked with impunity

Egypt continues to be a persecution hotspot for Christians. Recently, a Coptic Christian shop owner was killed in an attack by Muslim extremists in Alexandria.

Joined by his two brothers, a man attacked the Christian owner of a hardware store, stabbing and killing the owner and destroying the shop. They then attacked and raided two more stores, also run by Christians, leaving two more men hospitalized.

Arriving at the scene, police declared that the three brothers suffered from a mental illness and denied any religious persecution—a finding disputed by the local Christian community.

Open Doors UK CEO Henrietta Blyth sheds light on how persecutors are attacking with impunity in Egypt. “The lack of serious law enforcement and the unwillingness of local authorities to protect Christians leave them vulnerable to all kinds of attacks in Egypt,” she says. “Generally, neither church leaders nor ordinary Christians can speak up against these practices or achieve justice.”

PRAY WITH EGYPTIANS WHO FACE ONGOING RISK FOR FOLLOWING JESUS AND BEING PART OF A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

INDIA

They refused to deny Jesus—and extremists destroyed their fields

When they wouldn’t renounce their faith in Christ, local extremists threatened, then attacked them. When they still refused, two Christian families lost their livelihoods as their persecutors set their fields on fire, destroying their crops.

“They suffered a huge loss,” a local Christian leader shared. “They are farmers, and this harvest meant so much to them. Every year they kept some food grains for their consumption and sold a part of it to meet their other needs. They are greatly traumatized.”

Despite these trials, the families are strong in their faith: “What could be worse?” they said. “Yes, they can kill us, but we will not leave Jesus even if we have to die.”

PRAY FOR INDIAN BELIEVERS WHO FACE SUCH DIRECT ATTACKS ON THEIR LIVELIHOOD, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN AREAS WHERE COMMUNITIES ARE HOSTILE TO THE GOSPEL.
Christians face today when they gather for worship.

The number of Christians persecuted for their faith in modern history has reached an all-time high. Research for the new 2021 World Watch List found that more than 340 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. In the top 50 countries alone, 309 million believers suffer very high or extreme levels. Below, we share the numbers that represent the trials our sisters and brothers endure for following Jesus.

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, the devastating impact of persecution resulted in...
- 4,761 Christians killed for their faith
- 4,488 churches or Christian buildings attacked
- 4,277 Christians unjustly arrested, detained or imprisoned
- 1,710 Christians abducted for faith-related reasons

On average, every day...
- 13 believers are killed for their faith
- 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked
- 12 Christians are unjustly arrested, detained or imprisoned
- 5 Christians are abducted for faith-related reasons

Advocacy at all times to all leaders

One of the best parts about advocating for the persecuted church is knowing our work continues no matter who fills the top political posts in the United States or around the world. Whether advocating before presidents, kings (there are still a few left) or dictators, our message is the same: Listen to the stories of the persecuted, and help if you can.

That’s also why we approach our advocacy from a non-partisan stance, knocking on the doors of anyone willing to listen. If anything, our work has taught us that aid can come from places we might least expect, and that burning bridges only hinders the work God is trying to do for the persecuted in Washington, D.C.

In fact, our work often begins before political leaders take office. Over the course of the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign, we met with the offices of several candidates, emphasizing actions they could take to help advance religious freedom for Christians and others around the world. Our goal is to make ourselves a resource of information and counsel, and to encourage any “leader-to-be” not to lose the momentum gained in defending the persecuted communities.

As we progress through 2021, we plan to work as closely as possible with those in the White House, the State Department and with the nearly 70 new members of Congress that took office in January to make sure Christians living in some of the most difficult corners of the world are heard and not forgotten.

Specifically, our hope is to see some of the great initiatives started over the last few years continue to receive support from the United States. This includes the still-growing International Religious Freedom Alliance, where over 30 countries have formally signed up to advance religious freedom, as well as the annual Ministerial to Advance International Religious Freedom, where hundreds of policymakers and civil society representatives gather to share ideas and reaffirm their commitment to helping the persecuted church.

Multi-faith roundtables are also expanding quickly—providing a forum for people of all faiths and none to partner in advocating for greater religious freedom. Some of these roundtables—including ones forming in Iraq, Pakistan, Vietnam and elsewhere—need international support, lest their members be targeted for persecution.

We’re also encouraging the Biden administration and Congress to quickly appoint and confirm a highly qualified Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom (Editor’s note: As of press time, this position had not yet been filled). This position, held by Ambassador Sam Brownback for the last few years, is the knot that holds together the entire tapestry of international religious freedom efforts. With that position empty, the work begins to slowly unravel, and valuable time is lost for those on the ground in serious need of help.
Hajaratu lost so much in an attack. Nigerian Christians like her are under constant risk—is there any hope?

Faith in the fire

The dirt road to Chibob is the color of burnt sienna, strewn with potholes filled with rainwater from the recent storms. Footpaths crisscross the village, worn from years of travel, connecting the small clusters of homes. Cornfields fill the surrounding countryside, and cycad and dogoyaro trees dot the perimeter before giving way to deep forest, a common sight in this part of Nigeria’s Middle Belt.

But in the midst of this pastoral scene, there’s something darker. Most of the roofs are missing from the villagers’ homes—the roughhewn mudbrick walls are all that remain, covered with black stains of smoke and fire. The Fulani militant attack left the village in ruins. But it wasn’t just the homes that were destroyed.

On the night of July 10, 2020, the Fulani militants overtook the village, killing anyone in their path, torching homes and ransacking food storages. The devastation is easy to see, but what you can’t see is perhaps the most devastating thing of all.

In the Middle Belt of Nigeria, militant Fulani herdsmen kill and displace Christians and take over their farmland. Not all Fulani are militants. It’s the radicals within the Fulani who are specifically targeting Christians. There’s also an economic reality that drives this violence—attacks occur against the backdrop of climate change, environmental degradation and population growth, all of which have pushed militant Fulani herdsmen, with their cattle, southward to the Middle Belt.

But in many areas, it’s clear that Christians are specifically targeted. Churches are burned and Christian communities are brutally attacked while nearby Muslim communities—who largely live at peace with their Christian neighbors—are usually left untouched. This violence places tremendous stress on herder-farmer relationships—and it’s exploited by political and religious leaders who drive a radical Islamization
Meet Hajaratu

Hajaratu, a young Christian widow from Chibob, is one of these believers. When the Fulani militants attacked Chibob, Hajaratu lost so much more than her possessions, grain stores, animals and parts of her home. She survived the attack, but the gut-wrenching reality of life after that night has remained. It’s a harrowing story to share, but it’s the reality for thousands of Christians like her across Nigeria’s Middle Belt.

When we meet, Hajaratu sits outside her mudbrick house in front of her corrugated steel door, rusted from the rainy season and the hot Nigerian sun. A clothesline stretches across the outside wall, where a light blanket, colorful dresses, children’s clothes and scarves hang. Her home has a roof, but the walls of nearby homes are blackened by the scorch marks from the attack. Her hair is neatly pulled back and hidden behind a blue-green headwrap called a gele.

Her husband, David Matthew, died of an illness in 2019, leaving her to care for her children on her own. “Honestly, the difficulties I face are numerous,” she says. For Hajaratu, finding work to pay for school fees, medical bills and food is always challenging. But her biggest trial came the night of July 10.

That night, Hajaratu sat with her neighbors under a tree before going home to prepare dinner and get the children to sleep. After the children were safely in bed, Hajaratu remembers warming herself by the fire’s hot coals and falling asleep.

“About two minutes later, I heard the gunshots,” she says. That’s when she woke up the children, telling them to sleep. After the children were safely in bed, Hajaratu left her shoes there, trying to escape. The shoes are still there today,” Hajaratu shares.

She cried for help, but the other villagers were too far away. She picked herself up, soaked and muddy, her daughter crying on her back, and finally reached the river. She didn’t know how to swim, but the river wasn’t full. It was a risk she had to take if she and her family were going to survive. As gunshots cracked the air behind her, she stepped into the rushing water with her daughter.

The water grew deeper and deeper until Hajaratu reached the center and began to struggle. “I reached the deep part of the river where I got submerged and began to drown. My daughter cried as I struggled to the surface,” Hajaratu says.

She lost her footing, and the force of the water pulled her under and away from the riverbank. Her head went under the water and back to the surface again and again. She struggled against the current. At that moment, Hajaratu thought she would die in the river, along with her daughter.

Somehow, she made it to the bank. She was gasping for air. It was at that moment, on the muddy shoreline in the dark, she discovered her daughter was gone. The river had taken her daughter, along with the cloth wrapper, when Hajaratu struggled in the deep.

“I began to cry uncontrollably,” Hajaratu shares. There was nothing she could do. The fast-moving river had stolen her daughter.

Eventually, Hajaratu pushed on through the bush in the dark, unable to stop her tears. She made it to a nearby town, where a man and wife who heard the gunshots from a distance took her in and gave her shelter for the night. It was a night filled with mourning and deep grief.

Returning to Chibob

The next morning, Hajaratu went back to her village to see if she could find her other four children, desperately hoping they were alive. What she saw was devastating: burned homes; no livestock, because the animals had all been stolen; the bodies of neighbors who were killed and burned—but she saw no sign of her children. The smoke still lingered across the village when she, and other villagers, heard rumors of another attack.

Fleeing the village was under attack. “I flung my little daughter on my back, quickly strapped her [to my back] with a cloth and went outside to the gate.” Her other kids, old enough to run on their own, ran outside to join the rest of the people fleeing the village.

The shooting grew louder, and gunshots cracked and popped right beside her kitchen wall. “We all ran out, scattening in different directions,” Hajaratu says.

A dangerous escape

Hajaratu saw some people from the village running toward the river, so she followed, hoping to get help.

“As I came to the river, I fell and got stuck in the mud. I left my shoes there, trying to escape. The shoes are still there today,” Hajaratu shares.

She cried for help, but the other villagers were too far away. She picked herself up, soaked and muddy, her daughter crying on her back, and finally reached the river. She didn’t know how to swim, but the river wasn’t full. It was a risk she had to take if she and her family were going to survive. As gunshots cracked the air behind her, she stepped into the rushing water with her daughter.

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Pray for Hajaratu as she continues to deal with the trauma of losing her daughter. Ask God to protect her four remaining children and to provide for all their needs.

Pray for God to protect the Christians of Chibob from future attacks by Fulani militants and ask God to give them the courage to stay strong in their faith.

Pray for peace in the region and for the government to intervene and provide protection for Christians, as well as more relief and support for Christian villages when they’re attacked.

Pray for the church in Nigeria to grow in number and in obedience to remain a light for Christ in one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be Christian.

Pray for your partners on the ground in Nigeria. Ask God to give them wisdom and success in delivering support, trauma counseling, discipleship and training.
A Silent Epidemic

By Julia Warren

In late 2020, teenage Maria (we can’t reveal her real name, age or specific home country to protect her) was on her way to her factory job when three armed men kidnapped her. Neighbors showed up at her family’s home saying they had seen the men drag away their daughter.

“They pointed their guns at her,” their neighbors told them.

Three days later, Maria’s parents saw their daughter again—in court. In front of her family, the teen looked at the judge and shared five words that would change all of their lives: “I have converted to Islam.” She proceeded to speak in favor of her captor and even pleaded for his release. After hearing all the arguments, the court dismissed the petition filed by Maria’s family. Tragically, she left with the same three men who kidnapped her. One of the men had chosen Maria—who comes from a Christian family—to be his second wife.

“I was greatly encouraged through the [trauma] program. I am saying a big thank you even on behalf of those who attended. We are very grateful.”

Maria’s family. Tragically, she left with the same three men who kidnapped her. One of the men had chosen Maria—who comes from a Christian family—to be his second wife.

I picture the faces of Maria’s parents when they heard their daughter say those words. As I began my research for this article, I came face to face with a dark reality: What happened to Maria and her family isn’t rare, especially in places like Egypt and Pakistan where Christians are discriminated against and attacked in the Muslim-majority nations. Today, in 2021, believers are facing a silent epidemic: Christian girls and women taken from the streets and their homes, then forced to convert and marry a Muslim man. It is an epidemic with an overarching agenda.

Two women a day

Across many of the countries on Open Doors’ World Watch List, both “forced marriage” and “sexual violence” tie as the top global trend in how Christian women are targeted for their faith, according to Open Doors’ 2020 Gender-specific Religious Persecution Report.

Another recent study by the U.S.-based nonprofit Coptic Solidarity notes that in Egypt alone, the forced disappearances of Coptic Christian girls like Hajaratu may end up at informal camps for internally displaced people in Nigeria. There is nowhere else for these believers to go.

Features

Wrestling with God

The loss Hajaratu experienced rattled her faith. “I questioned God, why did He permit all these deaths to happen in Chibob—and especially in my family?” she shares.

She didn’t receive any clear answers, but she says she felt God saying it was the set time for those who died to depart this world. For now, this is what Hajaratu holds onto—a deep trust in God’s purpose and timing that we’ll never completely understand in this world.

Before this attack, Hajaratu says the Christians lived in peace with the Fulani. She says they loved them. Whenever the Fulani would lose someone, Hajaratu’s village would go to mourn with them and comfort them. And the Fulani would do the same for the Christians in Chibob. “Truly, we stayed in peace until this event occurred,” she says.

Islamic extremism shattered that peace. “Our constant prayer in the camp is that this type of terrible experience should never happen in Chibob again—nor to anybody,” Hajaratu adds.

The ongoing violence in Nigeria’s Middle Belt impacts thousands of Christians, just like Hajaratu. These believers desperately need both emergency relief and long-term support to recover from deadly Fulani attacks.

Through Open Doors, Hajaratu received food relief with items like rice and corn to feed her children, financial support to rebuild and trauma counseling. The counseling has helped her a great deal as she continues to walk through the bitter grief of losing her daughter.

“I was greatly encouraged through the [trauma] program. I am saying a big thank you even on behalf of those who attended. We are very grateful. The wisdom that God has given you to do this, may He increase it so that you can do more for others,” she says.

Finding the light

Hajaratu has since returned to Chibob with her children. She continues to wrestle with the loss of her young daughter, but she’s beginning to find hope, to see the light again. As we conclude our conversation in front of her house, she begins to separate corn into a large silver bowl. She’s singing as she works. In this part of Nigeria, even small tasks take on a melodic nature. The translation of the song’s lyrics unveils a wounded but worshiping heart:

Note: Open Doors has started a writing campaign for Hajaratu. Learn more at OpenDoorsUSA.org/letter-writing

By Julia Warren

On the streets of Egypt and Pakistan, Christian girls and women are disappearing—fueled by a dark and hidden agenda

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minor girls is "widespread." The study estimates about 500 such cases in Egypt within the last decade.

And in Pakistan, the trend is also growing at record-high rates. Hana, one of our ministry partners in the Gulf region, tells me. "Nowadays, there are at least two cases of disappearing Christian women and girls each day," she says.

Kidnappers are no respecters of age. In November 2020, our field shared about the abduction of a 13-year-old Pakistani girl named Arzoo. A 44-year-old Muslim extremist kidnapped the child from her home in Karachi while her parents were at work. A few days later, before a court, the man presented a marriage certificate. During the hearing, Arzoo declared her belief in Islam and told the judges she was 18. A judge declared she had converted to Islam of her own free will and returned her to her kidnapper. Our partners tell us that afterward, Arzoo tried to run to her mother, but her new "husband’s" tight grip on her arm stopped her. Like Maria, she left with her abductors.

A leader in Arzoo’s community articulated the horrific reality: “Her reactions, responses and behaviors are those of a brainwashed child,” he said. Thankfully, the court subsequently ordered the arrest of the man who abused Arzoo and forced her to marry him.

Young, unmarried girls are not the only targets. For the family of Christine Lamie, a wife and mother to two in northeastern Egypt, the day of April 7, 2018, changed their lives. When Christine, 26, at the time, didn’t return home from work, her husband, Bahaa, began calling relatives and friends. The next day, he reported Christine’s disappearance to local police—only to be told four days later that his wife had recently come to the police station and filed a report saying she wasn’t kidnapped and that she had “converted to Islam by her [free] will.” Christine remains missing.

“I know my wife very well,” Bahaa says. “She was forced to convert to Islam after she was kidnapped. She was pressured and threatened to make her do so.”

**Strengthen Islam and weaken Christianity**

While it may seem as if these are isolated cases of abduction for the purpose of forcibly converting a Christian to Islam (and in some cases, they might be), sources we have talked to tell us that something much larger and intricate is driving this persecution.

Actual organized networks of kidnappers are at work. In a rare interview, a former member of a network actively targeting Coptic girls and women in Egypt told us these networks have tens of thousands of members financed by wealthy Muslim radicals, mostly from Saudi Arabia. The Egyptian man and former Muslim (we’ll call him Gahiji) confirmed the aim of the kidnapping networks: “to strengthen Islam and weaken Christianity.”

“These men marry purely to convert more women to Islam,” he said, adding that many victims are handed over to extremists in an effort to cripple Christian populations and bolster Islam.

Gahiji was part of a Salafist group, a movement within Sunni Islam that calls for the restoration of authentic Islam. He offered specific details of how a kidnapping starts and progresses toward the end goal: “A group of kidnappers meets in a mosque to discuss potential victims. They keep a close eye on Christians’ houses and monitor everything that’s going on. On that basis, they weave a spider’s web around [the girls].

“The Salafist group I knew rented apartments in different areas of Egypt to hide kidnapped Coptic girls,” said Gahiji, who left Islam and the kidnapping ring several years ago. “They would put under pressure and threaten them to convert to Islam. If all goes according to plan, the girls are also forced into marriage with a strict Muslim.”

Kidnapping strategies can also be subtle. “A Muslim boy tells a Christian girl he loves her and wants to convert to Christianity for her,” Gahiji said. “They start a romantic relationship until one day they decide to ‘escape’ together.” One family solemnly recounted the story of their 18-year-old daughter, Maat, who was kidnapped through this “romance” tactic. Maat’s family priest tells the story:

“We heard that Maat had been kidnapped by a young man named Tor. He had taken her to a farm where he worked. We were eventually able to connect with an Egyptian researcher who confirmed the rumors over the phone: ‘Maat was seduced by a recruit of a Salafi organization. She was involved in a love affair, he was then able to convince her to run away with him.’

Her kidnappers released videos of the girl and posted them online. In the videos, Maat said she has converted. In one, she held a Quran. In the other, Gahiji described the “pressure”—shocking details that reveal the disturbing reality faced by these Christian women. “She will be hit and humiliated,” he said. “And if she tries to escape or convert back to her original religion, she will be killed.”

Shame is also a weapon. Kidnappers do things as vile as filming the rape of a girl or woman and threatening to make the video public as a means of forcing her into marriage. In an interview with the Washington Times, Mary Abdelmassih, a Coptic activist in Egypt, explained: “They tell her they’ll send the pictures to her family. She’d rather die than have that happen and live in shame.”

*Representative names used for security reasons.
both Egypt and the Gulf region local police are often not effective recourse for those who follow Jesus. The tentacles of corruption and persecution reach deep, with police officials in some areas working in collusion with kidnappers. Police who cooperate receive a part of the financial reward the networks pay kidnappers. The value of the reward increases whenever the victim is the daughter of a church leader or comes from a well-known Christian family.

In some cases, police provide drugs they seize to kidnappers who use them to weaken their victims. “I even know of cases in which police officers helped to beat up the girls to make them recite the Islamic creed,” Gahiji says.

Silent and silenced

Even if police aren’t specifically involved, Christian families tell us that officials seldom do anything when they report a suspected kidnapping or file a report. For the most part, police are biased against Christians.

Marginalized and devalued

In many ways, what’s happening to Christian women in these countries mirrors the worldwide $150 billion a year sex trafficking industry I’ve written about for 15-plus years. In both arenas, kidnappers and traffickers are organized, underpinned by large networks. Tactics like drugs, abduction, shame and romance are employed. And kidnappers often target the most vulnerable—the poor, the uneducated, the depressed. Most important, the surrounding culture is complicit, marginalizing and devaluing women and girls each day.” —Hana, Open Doors ministry partner in the Gulf region.

The desperation Maat’s mother expressed is the response these networks are aiming for with these abductions. The crimes are designed to frustrate and cripple the church and spread a radical form of Islam. Maria’s abduction has left her Christian community reeling. A believer from the area where Maat lived put his grief and frustration into words: “We cannot stop working. We still have to send our children to work. How else will we survive? But how will we survive if they keep sending our children to work. How else will we survive if they keep taking our children? What do we do? We are doomed either way!”

And while law enforcement may be our first course of action in the event of crime, in

The parents of 16-year-old Hoda Ataf Ghali Girgis know this firsthand. Hoda got into a tuc-tuc to come home from an Easter party at her church in Imbaba, Egypt. But she never returned home. Her parents filed a report with the police, but officials have taken no real action to recover the young girl. She is still missing.

Maria’s family encountered the same situation: “We rushed to the police station to ask for help,” her father says. “Because we were Christians, the policemen were reluctant to even take a first incident report.”

“arly don’t report it as a kidnap but say the girl ‘went missing,’” Gahiji explained. “Sometimes they don’t even open up an investigation. This way, they cover up the crimes of those they see as their Muslim brothers.”

However, in both Egypt and the Gulf region, Open Doors ministry partner Hana notes that the majority of families don’t even file reports. The known reputation of local police is one reason, but there is a deeper cause.

“They have been silenced,” Hana says. Families often receive such harsh threats—sometimes from kidnappers, sometimes by corrupt police—as a warning of what will happen to the rest of their family if they pursue the situation.

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In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, making Christian girls and women in these countries even more vulnerable to this unimaginable form of persecution. “There were fewer people on the street, which meant less protection,” Hana said. “They say the words and outwardly perform all the Muslim duties, but Jesus still lives in their hearts.”

Abducted on April 22, 2020, in Egypt’s Menoufia Governorate, 39-year-old Ranya Abd al-Masih tells a similar story. The high school teacher, wife and mother of three daughters appeared in a video three days later wearing an Islamic hijab saying she was not kidnapped and had converted to Islam. “Most kidnapped girls never truly convert to Islam,” Hana said. “They say the words and outwardly perform all the Muslim duties, but Jesus still lives in their hearts.”

But like the estimated 40 million plus girls and women abducted and coerced or forced into sex trafficking each year, the heartbreaking truth is that recovery of Christian girls and women abducted because of their faith is slow and often unsuccessful. “There’s usually only minimal recovery,” Hana said. “The families don’t get out of survival mode. We have to spend a lot of time with them, once they are ready and open.” Hana reminds us most of these families are Christians but have very little Bible knowledge. They haven’t been discipled or pastored.

“We need to re-preach the gospel into their lives,” she said. “That’s their only hope.” Hana has seen transformation. “When we get in full touch with the families and are able to send pastoral workers, we can pray with them, share from the Word and counsel.”

In a seemingly hopeless situation, hope is still alive. Thanks to your gifts and prayers, Open Doors is able to offer this kind of support. “Now, after our fellowship and teaching, [these grieving families] know the God who they pray to,” Hana said. “Their spiritual eyes are opened. They can confront the brokenness of this world with the wholeness of God.”

Julia Warren is a staff writer with Open Doors USA.

When I sat down to interview Afordia, a Nigerian woman who was widowed by Boko Haram, I hoped to offer some encouragement to a sister who was sure to tell me a difficult story. I knew the rough outline of her story—a brutal attack, a devastated church, a family broken by religious violence. I wanted to offer a comforting word to a fellow believer whose life has been overturned by persecution. But this sister’s story didn’t end in her brokenness—and her example is one I just can’t shake.

Afordia told me of an ordinary morning, when she made breakfast for her children, reviewed her schedule for the day and set off for work in a local clinic. But only a couple hours later, her cell phone lost signal and she knew: Boko Haram was about to arrive.

She said when Boko Haram came, they came with force: “They say, ‘We are here to look for Christians.’ So when they came to us, there was panic. I was seriously afraid.”

When the extremists asked Afordia and her husband, Isaac, “Are you infidels or are you Muslims?” the Christian couple didn’t respond in fear. They replied:

“When we are neither infidels nor Muslims. We are Christians.”

For that, Isaac was killed. By God’s grace, Afordia was released.

But here’s where the story changes: As she received trauma care, Afordia became an advocate. She began to speak out against religious violence, calling on Christians around the world to do the same.

“That God knows what we are going through... it gives courage to my heart to forge ahead.” Afordia said to me.

Forward, for her, means returning to work, where she provides healthcare to her neighbors who need it—Christians and Muslims, too.

We all get to choose what to do with our pain. We can choose to retreat or become resentful. We can choose to fight back or give into fear. But Afordia chose none of these: She chose to counter the force of Boko Haram with unwavering faith.

I think that’s exactly what Jesus meant when He said,

“But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also... you have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:38, 43-44).

Afordia’s example shows the Church doesn’t retaliate on the people who attack it. Rather, we can invest that pain into the good work—Jesus’ work—of making all things new, setting things right, showing love and peace and perseverance in dark situations and places.

As rapidly as extremist violence is spreading through Nigeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and beyond, the work of the Holy Spirit spreads faster. Where militants burn down one church, we rebuild 10. Where they take one life, we restore the lives of an entire community through discipleship and trauma care. Where they seek to snuff out Christianity, we replant it even deeper. The love of Jesus drives us to counter force with faith.

I pray we in the U.S. will have the courageous faith to speak out like Afordia did. I pray that every heart desolated by religious extremism would turn into fertile soil for the love of Jesus to grow. And I pray that every believer in sub-Saharan Africa will have access to encouragement and healing in the moments they need it most.

Will you pray with me?
Tim Scavo
Office Volunteer

W HEN DID YOU REALIZE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH WAS GOD’S HEARTBEAT—AND YOUR HEARTBEAT AS WELL? When I was 18 years old, I read Haralan Popov’s book, Tortured for His Faith, and was deeply moved by the plight of believers behind the iron curtain. I began donating to the needs of those precious brethren at that time. My passion for persecuted brethren has not dimmed, 50 years later.

A S AN OPEN DOORS VOLUNTEER, HOW HAVE YOU SEEN GOD WORK THROUGH YOU? I fervently prayed that the Soviet Union would fall and those believers be set free. God has not diminished, 50 years later.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST FULLFILLING PART OF BEING A VOLUNTEER? Connecting with the persecuted church via financial donations and volunteer work helps alleviate their suffering and makes a big difference in their well-being. I love seeing the lives of believers affected by what I do in America. Personal fulfillment never comes by doing what you want or by “finding yourself,” as the world says. It comes by serving others in Jesus’ name: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

Tina Marion-Swenson
Connector

W HEN DID YOU REALIZE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH WAS GOD’S HEARTBEAT—AND YOUR HEARTBEAT AS WELL? The Holy Spirit gave me a passion for sharing the stories of the persecuted church about six years ago. God brought stories, news reports, articles and books about persecution across my path. During that time, He gave me a fire and passion to share the stories of the persecuted church with Western believers and to unite them in prayer and support for our dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

A S AN OPEN DOORS VOLUNTEER, HOW HAVE YOU SEEN GOD WORK THROUGH YOU? As Connectors, we have the privilege of “connecting” the Western church with their larger church family around the world. My work with Open Doors has served as a means of reminding local believers that we are one Church, One Body of Christ, and that when one of us suffers every part suffers with it (1 Corinthians 12:26).

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST FULLFILLING PART OF BEING A VOLUNTEER? Working with the amazing Open Doors staff, sharing in Brother Andrew’s legacy and serving alongside other Connectors has been a true blessing. The most fulfilling part of being a Connector, however, is the privilege I’ve had to partner with God in supporting my brothers and sisters around the world. Whatever blessing they have received from the prayers and support I have helped to facilitate are far outweighed by the blessings being a Connector have given me.

1 Question

WHAT DOES JESUS’ DEATH AND RESURRECTION MEAN TO YOU?

Daniel Kenya
I can worship, work and live for God as a husband, son, father, brother, neighbor, as I am made alive in the reality of death.

Pastor George Syria
It means salvation and redemption from sin when we accept what Jesus did for us and we gain eternal life when we believe in Him.

Janice Schanding
I pray that should I ever have to stand up for the name of Jesus the way many of these brave men and women have, that too would be found faithful.

John Mathews
It means He hung on the cross for us; He took our pain. Thank you, Jesus—we didn’t deserve it, but He loves us and we should not turn our backs on Him. Thank you, Jesus, from you, Amen.

John Dennis Workman
It means my salvation, full and free! I’m saved from my sins through Jesus’ shed blood on the cross.

Jana Southern Africa
"O Death, where is your sting?" But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55,57).

Sarah Cunningham
Sr. Director of Staff Development and IER, Open Doors USA
One of the worst pains humans endure is that of losing those we love. For this reason, I’ve always found it incredibly powerful that—in the most climactic moment of history, the resurrection—God chose to demonstrate that He had power to reverse the laws of this universe: that He could overturn and invalidate death itself. In the one act of the crucifixion, He took the one thing we fear most and turned it into our biggest hope.

Catherine McElhaney
Eternal life and peace in my heart and mind!

John Mathews
It means I’m deeply loved beyond my understanding!

Steven Berg
For me, the cross is a symbol for the power of the God, because it is the symbol of the resurrection of Jesus.

Jana Southern Africa
"O Death, where is your sting?" But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55,57).

Teresa Hanna
His death was instead of mine; I was going to hell, but He gave me life and He was made victorious over death to give me power over evil and He filled me with His Spirit and He will come again to take me with them.

Claudia Soto-Neira
Sr. Director of Development Support, Open Doors USA
Jesus’ death and resurrection are the foundation of my Christian faith, and the reason why I’m certain that all those who love and follow Him will have eternal life.

Kristin Issa
Syria
It means that Jesus sacrificed His life to erase our sins and give us new life without sin.

Emily Smith
Hope. He fills the gap that nothing on this earth can ever fill. And hope that no matter what I do or what happens, I was given the gift of a child who would grow to be a man who would love me for who I am and give me hope that no matter what, I will never be alone.

Claudia Dowell
Jesus was born, He came to Earth as a man, if He had not died and then was resurrected, His coming to Earth would have just been a visit, like the visiting angels that came to Earth with a word from God: the death was and is and will always be everything to my life. Without that empty tomb, my life [would] be eternally pointless.

Kris Jensen
IT Director, Open Doors USA
Redemption and giving me a life worth living.

Meray Mansour
Syria
With the blood of Jesus, there was cleansing of humans from sin, and declaring the restoration of the relationship between God and people of eternal life.

Tina Marion-Swenson
Vancouver, Washington
**Pseudonym** // Unless otherwise specified, responses taken from the Open Doors USA Facebook page.
Devotional

READ & REFLECT

Amina* is a Christian in Nigeria who lost her husband in an attack from Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram. Five years after the attack, Boko Haram struck her village again. “I just said, ‘Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, have mercy on me! Lord, if I die today, what of my fatherless children? You promised me that I will stay with the children and that is what I know because I did not die that time, why now?’” Amina remembers. “Then I just said, ‘Lord, let Your will be done.’”

She kept praying the words of Psalm 118:17: “I shall not die but live to declare the work of the Lord. I said, ‘Lord, have mercy upon me.’”

Amina was captured by Boko Haram, held for a while and eventually freed. But her testimony shows a heart bent toward trusting God—the same type of heart that shows in the Scripture passage from Mark. When Mary Magdalene and Salome see the angel at Jesus’ tomb, they don’t know what happened. And they were scared—their teacher, the man who they believed was the Messiah, was dead and now His body was gone. Like Amina, the women at Jesus’ tomb weren’t sure what was happening or what God was doing.

But like Amina, Mary Magdalene and the other women eventually told the disciples, trusting that God had a plan. Mary saw the risen Christ, and He appeared to others. The stories of persecuted Christians have an echo in the death and resurrection of Christ: When all hope seems lost, and they are most afraid, God works to make His people resilient and reliant on Him, and hope is restored, miraculously.

Many Christians desire to leave a legacy that will help their favorite charities, like Open Doors—and leave a Christian testimony when they pass on.

Simply name Open Doors as a beneficiary of your assets or estate. You’ll have the joy of leaving a gift for persecuted Christians, and you’ll also save on estate and income taxes. It’s a wonderful way to support your persecuted sisters and brothers, and to secure your financial future.

For more information, please contact Karen Schneider at 800-659-5965, visit OpenDoorsUSA.org/Planned Giving or email her at karens@odusa.org

PRAY

God, we thank You for the example You gave in Your resurrection—and in Your protection of and care for Amina. We pray for Christians like Amina who are targeted for their faith. Keep them in Your love and help them to see Your hope, even when they are terrified. Show Your kindness and goodness to them. Break the hearts of their oppressors so they can see they need You. We ask all these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.

*Representative names used for security reasons

PRESENCE | March / April 2021
26