‘Father ... forgive them’

Violence and hope for India’s Christians
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By giving $30 a month, you can provide your persecuted family with critical support and emergency relief.

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‘Father ... forgive them’:
Violence and hope for India's Christians

India is the world’s largest democracy. But Christians like Vinita are attacked and discriminated against. Here’s how God still works even in the midst of brutal persecution.

‘Without your help, I would have died’

The attack on Preetha left her near death. But it also reminded her she is not alone.

Turn the tide in India
As you read the stories of Indian believers in this issue: Make it personal.

ON THE COVER
Vinita was beaten for her faith and then discriminated against when she went to the hospital. Turn to page 12 and see what’s facing Indian Christians—even in the midst of COVID-19.

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 curate 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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COVID-19 IMPACT

and what’s still left to do.

It’s been more than a year since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The entire world has suffered and waited desperately for an end to the pandemic, the lockdowns, the sickness and the death.

And yet, even as the world grappled with a once-in-a-century health crisis, persecuted Christians were bearing the brunt of a unique type of persecution. Just like the rest of the world, they suffered the economic impact of lockdowns. But they also experienced additional hardships because of their faith in Jesus.

Sub-Saharan Africa was one of the places where Christians suffered the most during the pandemic. Despite lockdowns, violence against Christians actually rose in 2020. Nigeria was the most violent place in the world for Christians to live in, even though much of the country was under tight travel restrictions for much of the spring and summer last year. And believers across Africa—in places like Nigeria, Somalia, Uganda and Niger—dealt with discrimination in government aid as well as being blamed by Islamic extremists for causing the pandemic.

Pastors serving in the most volatile rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa struggled to feed their own families because church incomes declined so radically under lockdown that salaries couldn’t be paid. When hardship strikes, Africans can usually depend on their community for support. But most converts cannot, because of their faith. They may be the only Christian in their communities, especially believers who have converted from Islam.

However, thanks to the generous support of believers around the world, Open Doors was able to deliver emergency assistance to nearly 4,000 families in East Africa and around 25,000 families in West Africa. It was a huge encouragement to our persecuted family, who once more saw the miraculous provision from the Lord.

“God used your support to bring hope to people in desperate situations.”

Jo Newhouse*, Open Doors’ spokesperson for the work in sub-Saharan Africa. “Time and again, we heard testimonies that our COVID relief has come just at the right time. It has served both as a reminder of God’s faithfulness and of the privilege it is to be part of the Body of Christ. The Christians you helped all know it was only possible because people gave sacrificially despite facing their own uncertainties and heartaches amid the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Sadly, though, the trouble is by no means over.

On February 17, the World Health Organization showed Africa still had the second lowest number of reported COVID-19 cases. But while this may be because of the youthful demographics across the continent, it’s likely the disease has been far more widespread than the numbers indicate, warns the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS). Even
though the pandemic has been very disruptive to economies and placed immense pressure on resources, there is still the public impression that the virus is not afflicting average Africans. This could make the second wave more threatening than the first.

Plus, Africa has secured vaccines, but there is limited availability, especially to those caught in conflicts. Open Doors fears the second half of 2021 could be devastating for Christians, particularly those believers who live in poverty and are violently oppressed for their faith.

Open Doors wants to see a prepared and resilient persecuted church in sub-Saharan Africa that is faithfully engaged in fulfilling the Great Commission. Those affected most radically by COVID-19 are the severely persecuted (pastors, widows and orphans, those displaced by conflict) and people who have converted to Christianity from Islam or traditional animist faiths. So we want to step up our support to these groups of vulnerable people standing at the crossroads of persecution and COVID-19, helping them through prayer and discipleship, economic development and assistance to adapt to the new reality of church life (online/cell church formats).

Our vision is to help more than 7,000 families in East Africa and 43,000 families in West Africa to weather the COVID-19 storm. Will you join us?

Open Doors was able to deliver emergency assistance to nearly 4,000 families in East Africa and around 25,000 families in West Africa.
While life is returning to normal in the United States post-pandemic, in many countries COVID-19 is still raging. And already persecuted believers are still facing discrimination, including denial of government aid in places like southeast Asia and increasing attacks in sub-Saharan Africa.

In April, Open Doors identified 50,000 of the most vulnerable Christians in sub-Saharan Africa alone. Because of you, our teams have been able to reach struggling believers like Josephina*, a Christian mother of seven from north Mozambique.

Since 2017, Josephina’s region has come under attack from Islamic insurgents who have since pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group. More recently, these extremists have targeted churches and Christians. They’ve killed hundreds of believers and displaced thousands.

After Josephina’s husband was brutally killed for his faith in an attack on their village, she found it impossible to take care of their children. At a displacement center, our partners reached this family on the brink of starvation with urgent relief—including a food kit, bedding and practical things like utensils.

The support Josephina received has met both physical and spiritual needs. “Today, I feel like a person,” she told our partners. “God really exists.”

50,000 vulnerable Christians receive life-saving COVID-19 relief

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Pray that our partners can reach believers in the many areas where the pandemic continues to challenge already vulnerable Christians.

Planting a future church in Vietnam

“I thank the Lord and I thank you for helping our family during this time. Please pray that my family will be able to plant a church in our area.”—Chien* in northwest Vietnam

Chien says this almost a year after villagers burned down the family’s house and rice fields while the family of five was away for a Bible study. In the remote mountainous areas of northern Vietnam, tribes often follow animistic beliefs. Anyone who leaves animism to follow Jesus is seen as an outcast—often persecuted relentlessly.

A local church in the area provided Chien’s family with land and a few materials to build their new home. Because of you, Open Doors’ partners were able to offer roofing materials and financial assistance to pay the workers. The new house is almost complete—with wooden pillars in place and roofing already attached.

Your support is taking the gospel to unreached areas.

Your support is keeping persecuted believers alive.

Pray that our partners can reach believers in the many areas where the pandemic continues to challenge already vulnerable Christians.

This is the kind of resilience and commitment to building the Kingdom our brothers and sisters share with us almost daily. Pray with Chien’s family and for this future church.

*Representative names and images used for security reasons
Persecuted at home, Indian converts equipped to earn income

Hema,* Mala* and Tabitha* don’t know each other, but they have similar stories—and prayers. All three women have all been persecuted for their decisions to follow Jesus. And all have seen significant changes in their lives as your support answered each of their prayers to contribute to their livelihood.

After accepting Christ, Hema’s husband abused her both verbally and physically. But because she can now contribute to the family’s dwindling income, her situation has improved. “I wanted to help lessen the burden but could not find the right way to do it,” Hema shares. “God has answered my prayers in a miraculous way. Seeing me earn a decent amount from stitching, my husband does not bicker and is happy for me. He wishes me well.”

Mala’s relatives and neighbors cut ties with her after learning about her faith. She and her husband also had difficulty meeting their daily needs. To add to their income, Mala learned to sew by watching videos online. But she couldn’t afford a sewing machine. “All I could do was earnestly pray,” she says. “Through you, God answered my prayer. With the earned amount, we use it for church work and, at certain times, to help poor and needy pastors.”

Finally, Tabitha accepted Jesus in her life and immediately her family expressed their hostility. Her brother threw a piece of burning wood at her; her father kicked her out of their home, forcing her to move in with relatives away from the home she knew. Because she couldn’t find a job, daily life became extremely difficult.

Things began to change, however, when Tabitha was offered two months of salon training through Open Doors partners. Because of your prayers and support, she can now earn an income. “After completing the training, I will train the church women and make the church economically strong,” Tabitha says. “So I am thankful to God who kept the right people in the right place for helping and encouraging believers like me.”

Malaysian Christians empowered with God’s Word

Because of you, Malaysian believers can hear and understand the Word of God in their own native language through audio Bibles provided by Open Doors partners. Though the Bible is available in Malaysia, it’s only in the English and Malay languages. But some believers can’t speak either one—they have their own tribal languages. And there are no physical Bibles in their languages.

Pastor Robert shares: “Thank you for the radio Bibles. I listen to it almost all the time. When I’m listening to the Word of God, it changes the atmosphere!” More than 300 Christians received God’s Word in their own language.

“Pray for Hema, Mala and Tabitha’s businesses. Ask God to give them wisdom and good health as they contribute to their families and churches.”

Your support has changed the lives of persecuted believers.

Pray that the Word takes root in these believers’ hearts as they grow in their knowledge of Christ and His love for them.

“When I’m listening to the Word of God, it changes the atmosphere!”

Your support gave 300 audio Bibles to tribal believers.
**Standing with grieving attack survivors in Indonesia**

After the deadly November 2020 attack on a Christian community in the village of Sigi, Indonesia, Open Doors’ local partners have regularly walked with the grieving and traumatized believers who witnessed the murders of four men—all leaders in the community. Through our partners, they have received training and practical aid.

During a recent visit, teams led persecution awareness sessions and Sunday School teacher trainings. Our partners also offered Sunday School activities for the village children (at least 25 saw the attacks). Because of your prayers and support, believers in Sigi are healing—aware that the worldwide Church is standing with them.

> Pray with our brothers and sisters in Sigi as they continue to grieve and heal. Pray for peace and continued faith.

**‘My heart cried’—Muslim meets Jesus in Central Asia**

In an undisclosed country in predominantly Muslim Central Asia, Nura* heard the gospel for the first time—with the help of Open Doors team members who visited her village.

“I’ve never heard about salvation because Islam doesn’t teach about it,” she shared. “My understanding about Jesus was that He is a good prophet only! When doctors came to our village with an evangelist, I was not happy. I thought that they came to push their religion.

“But they were taking care of us. They were not speaking about their faith! I went to them by myself and asked them: ‘Why you are doing it for us?’ Their answer pushed me in a shock! They said: ‘Jesus loves you, and we are doing it because we love Jesus!’

“My heart cried, and I received Christ in my heart! Thank you!”

**‘Because of your prayers ...’**

Don’t ever think your prayers aren’t important.

Praba lost her 7-year-old son Peter in the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka’s Zion Church. Recently, in a follow-up visit with the church on the second anniversary of the April 19 attack, Praba shared about God working in her through prayer. Listen to her beautiful testimony:

> “After we lost Peter, for about six months I could not pray. Whenever I sat down to pray, ‘Jesus’ was all I could manage to say. But people who have never seen us were praying for us when we could not. It is because of their prayers that we have been able to stay strong in our faith. Thank you for upholding our family in prayer during this time.”

**Pray with Praba and the families of 31 Zion Church believers who lost their lives in the attack. Pray they will feel the body of Christ standing with them.**
Frontline Faith

Perhaps most alarming was the way the pandemic was used to harm the Christian community: Of the 100,000 Christians reached by Open Doors partners for emergency COVID-19 relief in the first half of 2020, an estimated 80–90 percent of them were either denied government aid or discriminated against in aid distribution.

Heena, an Open Doors partner, shares how this plays out: “Christians may be discriminated against in the shops and be forced to travel to other villages to obtain food. We’ve seen Christians being given less food aid in distribution of relief aid, if given any at all. Often, aid distribution is pooled together for two or three villages. Christians [may be] discriminated against in this collective. This further prevents them from traveling to a neighboring village to receive aid when denied in their own village.”

And poor Christians in rural areas are much more at risk of this type of discrimination. “Those in rural areas tend to be more affected by discrimination, as they tend to be the daily wage laborers in their areas,” Heena says. “They also rely on communal resources for water and other utilities. Those in the cities are less affected by boycotts, as they generally have access to their own water supply and have government jobs.

“Christians [have] been told to renounce their faith or they will not receive aid. Warnings and threats are commonplace.”

Though these accounts are anecdotal, it’s nonetheless a disturbing pattern to witness in the world’s largest democracy. Even in rural areas, religious minorities like Christians should be able to have the same access to government pandemic aid as other faiths.

Indian Christians are clearly targeted for their faith—and, sadly, the pandemic has not changed this reality. Instead, it’s given persecutors yet another way to hurt followers of Jesus.

Pray for India as it recovers from the coronavirus pandemic and for the believers who are still suffering persecution.
Persecution Watch

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

EGYPT

Islamic State group re-emerges, threatens attacks on Christians

Egyptian Christians are on edge over the multiple kidnappings of Christians in the last few months—indicating the public re-emergence of the Islamic State group in Egypt. In late spring, the Islamic State group released a video of an execution of a well-known 62-year-old Coptic Christian man, Nabil Habashy Salama, who paid for the building of a church in the North Sinai region.

Several months ago, Nabil was kidnapped from his jewelry shop. In the video of Nabil’s execution, the group identified themselves as Islamic State and declared that Nabil’s execution is “a message to all Egyptian Christians.” Reportedly, they threatened more attacks on Christians.

Egypt’s Coptic Church hailed Nabil as “a martyr of the Church and the State,” adding that he “adhered to his religion until his death.”

“You made us proud,” his daughter wrote in a Facebook post after learning of her father’s death.

PLEASE PRAY FOR COMFORT FOR NABIL’S FAMILY AND STRENGTH FOR CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT WHO ARE CONTINUOUS TARGETS OF TERRORIST GROUPS IN THEIR HOMELAND.

NORTH KOREA

The unthinkable is happening in North Korea—again

A report by the United Nations indicates 40 percent of North Korea’s population is starving. That’s 10.3 million out of a total of 25.8 million people in the isolated country. That means there are an estimated 400,000 underground Christians in North Korea who are enduring this crisis as well.

While North Korean ruler Kim Jong-un has previously told North Koreans to “tighten their belts” and has spoken about the country’s economic difficulties, recently Kim used words he has never uttered publicly to describe the current situation.

Speaking to his party officials, the 37-year-old leader called on them to “wage another, more difficult ‘Arduous March’ in order to relieve our people of the difficulty, even a little.” The Arduous March came to be known as the “Great Famine” of the 1990s in which 2 million to 3 million people died.

Days before, Kim remarked that the country faced the “worst-ever situation” and “unprecedentedly numerous challenges.” Even with the markets open, most people don’t have the money to buy anything. Food shortages have quadrupled prices, with horrific reports of 35 ounces of corn costing more than a month’s wages.

Our sources also report that many citizens have already passed away due to malnutrition and starvation.

PLEASE PRAY FOR COMFORT FOR NABIL’S FAMILY AND STRENGTH FOR CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT WHO ARE CONTINUOUS TARGETS OF TERRORIST GROUPS IN THEIR HOMELAND.

MYANMAR

Coup traumatizes pastors as they remember the atrocities under military rule

Since the latest military coup in February, pastors in Myanmar—traumatized by memories of the past—tell us that they have been struggling spiritually. The recent coup brings back memories of the atrocities they suffered under military rule in the ’90s.

Pastor Min Naing* shared: “Since the coup started, I don’t feel like reading the Bible. I feel lethargic to preach, and I don’t know how to pray.”

Through Open Doors partners, he participated in trauma counseling. “It not only strengthened me, but I was able to encourage others as well,” he shared. “The country is not without hope.”

PLEASE PRAY FOR COMFORT FOR NABIL’S FAMILY AND STRENGTH FOR CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT WHO ARE CONTINUOUS TARGETS OF TERRORIST GROUPS IN THEIR HOMELAND.

FATHER, WE PRAY RIGHT NOW FOR SPIRITUAL REVIVAL FOR YOUR PEOPLE. TOUCH THEIR HEARTS AND REKINDLE THEIR SPIRITS. WE ASK YOU TO GIVE THESE LEADERS THE WORDS TO SAY TO POINT THEM TOWARD YOU.

O GOD, OUR HEARTS CRY OUT FOR OUR NORTH KOREAN FAMILY. WE PRAY THAT YOUR PEACE, WHICH TRANSCENDS ALL OUR HUMAN UNDERSTANDING, WOULD REST ON THESE SISTERS AND BROTHERS AS THEY WALK WITH YOU IN SUCH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS.
Frontline Faith

### CHINA

**House church pastor sentenced and fined for fighting cross removal**

Once again, we’re reminded of the urgent need to pray with our church family in China. The sentence for the arrested leader of the large Yuanyang County Central House Church was recently handed down. For the next five and a half years, Pastor Li Juncai will spend his life inside prison walls as a political prisoner. He was also fined 210,000 yuan ($32,423).

Pastor Juncai’s crime? He objected to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) forcible removal of the cross atop the church’s building in Henan province. Li Chao, Pastor Juncai’s son, contends that CCP authorities fabricated all the charges against his father because he took a retaliatory stand against the state’s demolition of the church’s cross—as well as the CCP’s general oppression of house churches.

Pastor Juncai also refused to change a core value in the church from “Love God and people” to “Love the country”—another sign of the CCP’s push toward Chinese nationalism.

“The situation in China is likely to continue to escalate as the Chinese Communist Party increases its power and focuses on Chinese nationalism,” Open Doors USA CEO David Curry explains, noting that pressure on the Body of Christ is growing increasingly worse. “The government is trying to force out unregistered churches, slowly turning up the heat and making it a ‘Chinese’ church, not a church of Jesus.”

**PRAY FOR PASTOR JUNCIAI, HIS FAMILY AND HIS CHURCH AS HE REMAINS INSIDE PRISON WALLS. PRAY FOR MIRACULOUS RELEASE AND FOR THE MANY CHURCH LEADERS FACING CCP OPPRESSION.**

### BANGLADESH

**Christian converts targeted by extremists in violent reconversion campaign**

In northern Bangladesh, Christians have been facing increasing persecution as Muslim extremists went door-to-door to force Christian converts to return to Islam.

It’s just another example of the extreme persecution Christians in places like Bangladesh can suffer. For Christians who have converted from Islam in Bangladesh, the danger is even greater.

Our local partner, Brother Abraham, shares: “[The extremist group has] sent a message to all the local mosques and local leaders saying that it is their responsibility to let the Christians renounce their faith and go back to Islam. They’ve also listed names and addresses of the Christians. And now, regularly, two times a day, they visit the believers’ homes and [try to] force them to renounce their faith in Jesus. When they refuse to renounce, they are threatened with violence.”

The group is persecuting with impunity. “When [the believers] informed the police, they were harassed and insulted,” Abraham says. “The police said, ‘You should be shot to death! Why did you convert to Christianity and leave Islam?’ These believers really need your prayers.”

**PRAY ABOUT THIS SITUATION AND WITH CONVERTS WHO LIVE WITH THE CONSTANT THREAT OF THIS LIFE-THREATENING ULTIMATUM. ASK GOD TO CONFUSE THESE ATTACKERS’ PLANS AND BRING PEACE TO HIS PEOPLE.**
‘Father, forgive them’

By Christopher Summers

*Names changed for security reasons.*
India is the world’s largest democracy. But Christians like Vinita are attacked and discriminated against. Here’s how God still works even in the midst of brutal persecution.

***

It is written in God’s Word: “When you follow me, people will persecute you.”

Finding faith in Jesus made a big difference to Vinita’s life. “Before coming to the Lord, I had a lot of troubles and all kind of difficulties,” she says. “When I came to the Lord, I had a peace of mind that nobody else offered.”

At first, her husband wasn’t sure about this new faith. So, she prayed for him—and God brought her husband to faith as well. “He also accepted Christ and got baptized,” she says. Her sister Isha also came to faith after seeing the change in Vinita’s life.

Vinita wanted to share the peace she had found in Christ with even more people, but in her area of India, such actions—particularly by converts from Hinduism—can lead to brutal persecution. “I tried to share the gospel with many [people], but they did not listen,” she remembers. “They spoke badly to me saying, ‘You are worshiping a foreign God instead of our gods and goddesses.’

“Our neighbors caused a lot of troubles for us. They created a mess in front of our gate by throwing garbage. They looked for reasons to fight and to create a rift between us. Still, we did not take any notice and ignored them. I never gave up—I knew my job was to share the Word of God.”

If not for God, we would have been dead.

But one day, the attacks on Vinita and her family became more extreme. “My sister was returning back from work when my...
neighbors started a fight with her,” Vinita says. “She tried to escape, but they started to beat her. I went to rescue her and they hit me too.”

Not only did her neighbors physically attack Vinita and Isha—the attackers then went to the police and accused Vinita and Isha of attacking them.

“When we went to the police station, the police did not help us because the attackers had already bribed them with money, and they are well acquainted with influential people,” Vinita explains. The sisters’ injuries weren’t serious, but Vinita and Isha were shaken by the attack and worried about the false case that had been filed against them. They called their pastor, and he came with his daughter and his wife, Preetha*, to pray with them.

But when the Hindu extremists from Vinita’s community heard a pastor had come to Vinita’s house, they decided to come and finish what they had started.

“Eight or nine men from the neighborhood barged into the house,” Vinita says. “They were armed with rods in their hands. For almost 30 minutes, they were hitting us and breaking things. They were running after me and beating me. They were stamping us with their legs.

“While they were beating me, I was holding my 6-month-old daughter in my arms. They snatched her and threw her down.

“I felt that we would not be spared.

“My life was saved as I rushed into my neighbor’s house. [The attackers] were shouting, ‘Bring her out!’ But God protected me, and my life was spared. If not for God, we would have been dead.”

WE COULD NOT RECEIVE TREATMENT

Somehow, everyone survived the brutal attack. Perhaps most amazingly of all, Vinita’s baby girl escaped with just a few scratches on her legs.

But Vinita and the others were more seriously hurt. “My head was injured, and I had deep injuries near my hip and on my shoulders,” she says. “My sister sustained serious head injuries. My pastor’s daughter was also hurt on her hands and legs. They hit our pastor’s wife.”

Preetha, the pastor’s wife, was in the most critical condition. When one of the men went to hit her with a metal rod, she lifted her hand to protect her head from the blow. She was knocked unconscious, and her hand was almost cut in half. She also had a broken leg and other internal injuries.

“Somehow, I [gathered] everyone and together we went to the hospital,” Vinita says. “When we were admitted to the hospital, we could not receive treatment because there was pressure from the attackers.”

The extremists had already tried to kill them physically—and now they were preventing the Christians from receiving lifesaving treatment. “[Preetha’s injuries were] very serious,” Vinita says. “I prayed for God’s quick healing upon her. I prayed, ‘Father, you alone show your power and heal us.’”

God answered Vinita’s prayers—but perhaps not in the way she expected. “Partners from Open Doors came forward to help us,” Vinita says. “They took us to another hospital and got us treated and paid our hospital expenses.”

It was your prayers and support that made this possible—and it saved Preetha’s life. “If the partners did not help, my pastor’s wife would have died,” Vinita says.

THIS GAVE ME HOPE

Your prayers and support are helping Open Doors local partners to continue to support Vinita after the attack on her family. The attack on Vinita’s home had robbed her of the ability to work in her home-based shop.

“When I went back home, I saw that they had broken all the items [in my shop],” Vinita says. “I felt dejected. I was not able to understand how I would move forward and run the shop.

*Preetha is a pseudonym.
“Before coming to the Lord, I had a lot of troubles and all kind of difficulties. When I came to the Lord, I had a peace of mind that nobody else offered.”
“By the grace of God, partners from Open Doors gave me new items for my shop. This gave me hope that I can run my shop and earn. So, I want to thank them.”

Your support is also providing legal support to help fight the false case brought against Vinita and Isha and to lodge a case against their attackers. “Pray that we may win the case,” Vinita asks.

On top of the persecution they have faced, Vinita and her family are also facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your support is helping them to survive this crisis as well. “When quarantine started, my husband’s and my work came to a standstill. We faced hardship as we had no money and no groceries. I used to pray, ‘O Lord, please bless us so that we can afford some food for survival.’ I also prayed for those brothers and sisters who would be suffering like us during the lockdown.

“God took care of our needs. Partners from Open Doors helped us with our daily grocery needs.”

Vinita doesn’t know what the future holds. COVID-19 may continue to affect the family’s income, and they still face threats from their community.

“Even now they threaten us and say, ‘We will not let you stay here.’ They say they will drive us out of the place and make us beg,” Vinita says.

But your support and prayers will enable Open Doors local partners to continue to provide Vinita and her family with the help and encouragement they need. Our local partners are also working with Vinita and her family to see if there is a safer place where they can live. She says, “To those people who have helped me, I would like to thank them for the help.”

FORGIVE THEM

After everything Vinita has been through, it would be understandable if she felt hatred toward her persecutors. But she says: “When Jesus left this world, He said, ‘Father, these people do not know what they are doing. Forgive them.’ From this verse, I learned to forgive my enemies. And I pray that the attackers have a change of heart.”

When asked if she has ever thought of leaving her faith so the persecution will end, she says:

“I have never thought we would leave God, because God safeguarded us and helped us. I will never leave the Lord.”

Vinita’s strong faith has sustained her—and her testimony should encourage every Christian. “Hardships come when we follow God, but God helps and brings us out from difficulties,” she says. “If we leave God, our situation will only get worse. Remain in Christ Jesus who sustains us and He will bless you. We have peace only in Christ Jesus, so do not leave Him. Peace in Christ is found nowhere else.”
SHE ASKS

“Pray for my daughter and my whole family that we may be safe. We live in fear that [our community] might do something to us. Pray, as they still threaten us, that the threats will stop.

“Pray for us to be strong in faith, to be fearless.

“I am also thankful to God for blessing us immensely. Even in our difficult situation, our Father has helped us.”

Persecution in India

The attack on Vinita was not an isolated one. While Open Doors local partners hoped the COVID-19 lockdowns would lead to fewer attacks on Christians, this sadly was not the case—hundreds of believers were physically attacked because of their faith last year in India. Vinita is just one of many believers who has faced violence because of their faith in Jesus.

Alongside violent attacks, many more Christians in India also experience discrimination—and this can be just as deadly. Not only was Preetha, the wife of Vinita’s pastor, almost beaten to death—medical professionals in a government hospital also refused to treat her, and would have let her die, simply because she is a Christian.

Pastor Samuel*, an Open Doors local partner, says: “This is something very common in India. When [the Christians] are brought to the hospital, mostly the hospital [denies] the medical help to those people. And the police take a lot of time in registering their cases. These people suffer a lot.”

Additionally, thousands of believers were denied government food aid during the COVID-19 lockdowns because of their faith and would have starved to death without help from Open Doors local partners.

This is why your prayers and support are so vital. You help to provide lifesaving support, such as medical treatment for those who are attacked, and vital food aid to those denied government relief. And you provide legal training and support so Christians in India are able to seek justice when they face discrimination and violence.

Pastor Samuel says: “My dear brothers and sisters, we are all able to do what we are doing only because you are praying, because you are supporting. Thank you so much for all your prayers, all your support, everything you are doing for the persecuted church.”

PLEASE PRAY FOR VINITA AND HER FAMILY.
‘WITHOUT YOUR HELP, I WOULD HAVE DIED’

By Christopher Summers
The attack on Preetha left her near death. *But it also reminded her she is not alone*

When Preetha* woke up, the first thing she felt was pain—all over her body, in her leg, in her head, in her hand.

Slowly, her eyes adjusted. A bright light buzzed above her. She could smell disinfectant.

She was in a hospital.

The pain throbbed through her body, but the worst pain was coming from her hand. She looked down at it; it barely looked like a hand. There were deep cuts in four of her fingers and her palm, and blood was everywhere.

Her eyes welled up with tears. She could see her daughter, Mirai*, in the bed next to her, with her own deep cuts and dark bruises. *What happened?* she thought, trying to make sense of the situation. And then it started coming back to her. The drunk men. The iron rod.

Her son sat with her, and he was also crying. *“I don’t know what we’re going to do,”* told Preetha. *“The doctors are saying they won’t treat you because we’re Christians. Where can we go now?”*

Tears streamed down Preetha’s face. *I’m going to die,* she thought.

A God who heals

Preetha looked over at Mirai from her hospital bed. Despite her wounds, Mirai’s skin was still so beautiful.

Preetha would never forget the day she went with Mirai to ask the pastor to pray for her. Back then, Preetha’s husband, Navin, confronted and beat Christians. And yet, Mirai’s skin disease had left them both at their wits’ end. They tried everything the Hindu priest suggested—fasting and praying to the Hindu gods, taking part in all kinds of rituals and ceremonies. Nothing helped; Mirai never seemed to get better.

But Christians said Jesus could heal people. Surely it was worth a try? *“If this God will heal her, I will serve Him for the rest of my life,”* Preetha said.

She wondered if the pastor would ask for money, or some other favor, but he didn’t. He just prayed to Jesus and asked Him to heal Mirai’s skin. And He did! Preetha cried tears of joy that day. When Navin came home and saw Mirai that night, he couldn’t believe it—her skin was perfect.

And so, their family began to follow Jesus. Navin stopped drinking, gave up his old work making Hindu idols—and, eventually, he felt God calling him to be a pastor.

There were people who didn’t like their new faith. One of them was Preetha’s father. He was pleased to see Mirai had been healed of course. But he had raised Preetha as a good Hindu—he felt like his daughter was rejecting him and everything he had taught her by rejecting their traditional faith.

But Preetha prayed for her father. *“God, you have chosen us. So now, save our relatives through us too.”*

*Names changed for security reasons.*
Slowly, her father’s heart softened. He would ask Preetha to pray for him when he was sick. Before he died, he had decided to follow Jesus.

But not everyone was won over. People threatened them, telling them to stop gathering their church, and to stop their ministry. These people said Christianity was a foreign religion, that they were “anti-Indian” for following Jesus.

And finally, these threats turned to violent action.

‘Where are the Christians?’
Preetha and Mirai had gone with Navin to pray with a lady from their church, Vinita [see Vinita’s story on page 12]. Vinita’s husband was at work, but she had her baby girl there, and her sister was there too.

After they spent some time in prayer together, they heard a commotion outside.

As it got louder, they could hear people shouting: “Where are the Christians?” they shouted.

Then, suddenly, a group of men barged through the door—within seconds, they filled the small house. They stank of alcohol.

It all seemed to happen so fast. The leader of the group grabbed Navin by the shirt. “We don’t want Christians here!” he yelled.

The other men started smashing everything in sight. Preetha watched in horror as one of them grabbed Vinita’s baby and threw her on the ground. The baby screamed. Preetha rushed forward to pick her up, but one of the men caught her by the arm. He was holding a metal rod, and he lifted it up high above her head. Preetha held up her hand to try and stop the blow—and then everything went dark.

In the hospital, Vinita came and sat next to Preetha’s bed. Her baby was on her lap; thank God, the little girl had somehow survived the ordeal without any serious injuries. Vinita didn’t seem to have been as lucky; there was blood on her head and on her hands, but she wasn’t as severely wounded as Preetha.

Vinita’s eyes were closed—she was praying. Preetha heard her whisper: “Father, you alone show your power. Heal us.”

Preetha had seen God heal—He had healed Mirai’s skin right before her eyes. But would He choose to heal her this way? Or was she going to die?

In fact, God had another plan. Navin was by her bed now.
“Preetha, I’ve been speaking to Pastor Jeet*,” he said. “He says his team will help us—they’re going to take us to another hospital where you can be treated.

“You’re going to be OK.”

‘I want to say thank you’
Pastor Jeet is an Open Doors local partner and was able to take Preetha to a different hospital and pay for her treatment. Preetha says, “Had Open Doors partners not helped us, I would have died.”

Your support has also enabled Open Doors to provide Preetha and her family with legal support. They have filed a case against their attackers. She asks us to pray for them: “Pray for the persecutors who oppose God, that they may know the love of God.”

Despite the trauma Preetha has experienced, she says she is comforted by God’s Word. She quotes Isaiah 49:15, which says: “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”

“God is always with me.”
“I want to say thank you, not just to God but also to His people who have helped us. I am thankful for what God’s people have done for me. They helped, thinking of me as their own.”
“This word strengthens me,” she says. “God is always with me.”

Your prayers and support are enabling Open Doors local partners to provide vital practical and spiritual support for persecuted believers like Preetha and Navin, not only helping them to survive but also showing them they are not forgotten by their global Church family, or by God.

Preetha says: “I want to say thank you, not just to God but also to His people who have helped us. I am thankful for what God’s people have done for me. They helped, thinking of me as their own.”

The attack on Preetha left her near death. But it also reminded her she is not alone.

Please continue to stand with your church family in India in prayer and action.

- Pray for Preetha’s continued healing. Her hand has been permanently damaged and still causes her pain.
- Pray God will change the hearts of the extremists who carried out this attack and draw them to Himself.
- Pray for protection for our church family in India against attacks like this.
- Pray for Open Doors local partners in India, for wisdom and energy.
- Pray they will be able to reach those most in need of support.
For those of us who are still free to speak out, the challenge is to get anyone to pay attention. In Washington D.C., India is seen as the best opportunity in pushing back against the influence of China. This leaves policymakers from both parties reticent to engage forcefully, though it does still happen.

In 2015, President Obama twice prominently raised concerns, including at the National Prayer Breakfast, pointing out that “acts of intolerance” were taking place against people of faith “that would have shocked Gandhi.” In 2020, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended India be designated a “Country of Particular Concern” for “systematic, ongoing and egregious” violations of religious freedom. It was the first such recommendation in 16 years.

In response to calls like this, Indian government officials have consistently and loudly condemned U.S. officials for speaking out, often responding with something to the effect of “mind your own business.” No doubt many officials in India would prefer the rest of the world stay silent as the situation for religious minorities deteriorates.

Yet attempts by Indian officials to silence advocacy belie the fact that this advocacy still works. Although limited, we’ve seen cases where harassment against Christians was stopped after receiving major domestic and international attention.

Through the rest of 2021, Open Doors USA will partner with advocates around the world in a concerted campaign to speak out for our family in India. Through prayer and advocacy, our hope is that we can keep the window from closing and ensure the church in India is not silenced for good.
Spotlights

Sam & Evelyn Laci
Connectors

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.
We have been married for 46 years. We have five grown children and 10 grandchildren. Evelyn is a legal secretary. Sam works for a non-profit food bank. We have been involved in ministry for 43 years.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME AWARE OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?
Evelyn received a card in the mail for a free copy of God’s Smuggler. She sent for the book, which put her on a mailing list with Open Doors. Through this, she started a monthly prayer meeting for the persecuted church. Evelyn was invited to a Bridgebuilder conference. The second conference I [Sam] tagged along. That conference changed my life.

WHAT’S A PLACE YOU HAVE A HEART FOR?
We have a heart for the [Muslim-majority] world.

HOW DO YOU SERVE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH THROUGH OPEN DOORS?
We do a number of activities to promote the persecuted church in our area, including praying for a country in Sunday morning church and sharing about [persecuted Christians] whenever we have the opportunity. Our real passion is to share the stories we hear from persecuted believers. We have taken 12 trips to World Watch List countries. We are active in praying for the persecuted church.

WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ENCOURAGEMENT YOU’D OFFER TO OTHERS ABOUT HELPING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?
Remember, in all things God is in control. Develop an attitude of prayer, for that is the real battle. No matter how big the struggle, God will reveal Himself and glorify His name through it.

Linda Storm
Connector

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.
I am retired, a leader of various prayer groups and the women’s prayer team at my church, mother of three grown sons, grandmother of two and I live in Ontario, California.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME AWARE OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?
I started hearing about persecution by reading the many missions letters and info from various organizations over 20 years ago. Dr. [James] Dobson wrote a letter about it back in 1997, and a friend called and said, “We have to do something,” so I started a prayer group. This led me to Open Doors in searching for information to pray about.

WHAT’S A PLACE YOU HAVE A HEART FOR?
I have a heart for the persecuted church everywhere, but especially the Muslim-[majority] world! This corresponds with the passion for missions, since it seems to me that where there is the greatest missions need, there is often the most persecution! I am also very grieved about the unrelenting and increasing persecution in Nigeria.

HOW DO YOU SERVE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH THROUGH OPEN DOORS?
The largest part of my ministry is at my church, where I host a quarterly table for the persecuted church, with lots of resources that are offered. I started a prayer group in my home in 1997 that focuses on the persecuted church and it still meets!

WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ENCOURAGEMENT YOU’D OFFER TO OTHERS ABOUT HELPING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?
If you have a heart for the persecuted church, please step out in faith and just start doing something! Look for open doors and where God is already working. He will direct you. Pray for God to lead you to “like-minded” people and start a prayer group.

Volunteer

If you’re interested in volunteering with Open Doors, contact Connect@odusa.org for more information.
I wish I could show you the pictures they showed me. These were photos of Christians, chained to a wall. Arrested for attending church, they were held without trial, representation or any form of dignified treatment.

It was a raw and brutal scene.

Before this moment, I had only heard their stories. I had never seen their faces. I didn’t know their names. But when I saw their pictures, it became personal.

It’s easy to assume India, the world’s largest democracy, would afford Christians the protection of a justice system. Still, more than 67 million followers of Jesus risk false imprisonment, violent attack and worse in India every day.

Persecution at this scale is possible only because it is enabled from the highest levels of government and enforced by local authorities. Hindu nationalists believe that to be Indian is to be Hindu, despite more than 20 percent of its population avowing other faiths. This emboldens people in villages and municipalities who wish to force Christians out.

The result: hundreds of our brothers and our sisters, chained to a wall for attending a church service. Law enforcement looks the other way, and there is no one they can call to set them free.

But they do have family, and it’s much stronger than any governing force. For that reason, I believe persecution in India can decline as rapidly as it has risen.

We, their family in the free world, can lean the full force of our weight against the oppressive load on our brothers and sisters. We can support the grassroots efforts that literally unlock their chains and ensure they have a safe place to go once they are free. We can advocate for our own government to leverage its strong relationship with India to pressure for human rights protections.

And most importantly, we can pray their persecution will deepen their uncompromising love for Jesus, which makes every sacrifice worthwhile. The faces in the photo I saw—they were there because of their love for Jesus. We’ll be there because of our love for them, too.

Within a generation, we can turn the tide of persecution in India. We can make a monumental difference for millions of our sisters and brothers—because that’s what families do.
If you’ve been reading *Presence* magazine for a while, you might remember the story of Kusum*. She’s a Christian in India, and she was blamed by her in-laws when her son and husband got sick and died. Her father-in-law terrified her, threatening to kill her because he blamed her faith in Jesus for his son’s death.

But Kusum is New Testament faith come to life.

“Due to my Christian faith, I faced a lot of persecution from my in-laws and the villagers,” she says, “but now many villagers are coming to Jesus in my village. Since the [COVID-19] lockdown, 10 new families have come to Christ!”

Her witness and sharing of the gospel have even brought some of those who persecuted her to faith in Jesus. “My in-laws used to persecute me a lot, but now they are believing in Christ. Many times, they used to come to my house to kill me. I always used to pray for them. The Lord heard my prayer, and now they have become believers.” She says even her father-in-law—who is not a Christian—has been asking her to pray for him.

Kusum’s testimony is a good reminder of the power of prayer. Though her situation is still tenuous, she has grown in faith—and has faithfully spread God’s hope and peace to people who didn’t want to hear it. Her example is a strong reminder of God’s faithfulness and His love for all people, even the ones we might feel can never change.

**REFLECT**

God, we thank You that You can change even the hardest hearts. We ask You to give us the courage to live out our faith with the same confidence shown by Kusum. We thank You for her example and testimony of Your goodness, and we ask that You will bless her and keep her safe from ongoing persecution. In the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**READ**

“I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.”

Philemon 1:4-6 (ESV)

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*Representative names used for security reasons*
A lifetime income that allows you to give & receive

Your charitable gift annuity with Open Doors will help further our mission, for which you care so deeply. And you will receive the security of fixed annuity payments for your lifetime, backed by Open Doors’ assets and our obligation to pay.

Now is the right time to lock in your payout rate with a gift to fund a charitable gift annuity.

You’ll make a difference in the lives of persecuted believers all over the world.

To find out how high payments could be for you and to learn more about charitable gift annuities, please give us a call at 949-862-0321 or 800-659-5965, visit OpenDoorsUSA.org/PlannedGiving or email Karen Schneider, our Director of Planned Giving, at karens@odusa.org.