

[SECRET] CHURCH

[REDACTED] worship [REDACTED] with
[REDACTED] the [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] world's [REDACTED]
hidden [REDACTED]
Christians [REDACTED]

LEADER GUIDE

2023/24 DIGITAL
SURVEILLANCE
EDITION

[SECRET] CHURCH

**How can you be church, when religious meetings are banned?
 How can you learn from God's Word, when you can't get a Bible?
 How do you worship, when your neighbour - or even the person
 worshipping next to you - might be a spy?**

Millions of Christians across the world must worship in secret. They cannot gather in a church building - because buildings are banned. They don't have a Bible because it's too dangerous. They can't even sing to God in anything above a whisper.

They are the secret church. Their gatherings are dangerous and illegal. And yet still they dare to meet: under cover of darkness; in caves, forests and cellars; in apartments and houses.

In many countries, governments are increasingly using sophisticated digital surveillance techniques to keep tabs on Christians and to scare them into inactivity, to stop them from meeting together. But, despite the difficulties and the danger, Christians are managing to stay under the radar, finding creative ways to continue their church activities and share Jesus no matter the risk.

And this is your chance to join them. Just for a while.



Image: A secret house church meeting in North Africa



Image: A packed Chinese house church in the late 1980s

1.1 WHAT IS THIS?

Secret Church gives a taste of what it is like to worship with the world's hidden Christians. It uses approaches from underground church meetings all around the world, 'translated' into a session outline for you to use with your group or church.

1.2 WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- A Bible and a pen
- Some grapes

1.3 LEADERS: HOW TO PREPARE

Read through the material beforehand so that you know what each activity involves. There are some stories, prayer points and other sections that you may want to ask different people to read out or take a lead on. Share the relevant pages of this guide before the session so that they are prepared.

1.4 HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

The session should last around 60 minutes, but feel free to cut out elements, or spend longer than suggested on others – whatever works for your group and context. And of course, you can run these ideas over several weeks, exploring how secret Christians worship, read the Bible, take Communion or support one another over different sessions.

1.5 WHERE DO WE MEET?

Could you choose a completely different venue for your service? Secret churches meet in many different locations: hotels, office spaces, fields, barns, warehouses, apartments and houses. This is a perfect opportunity to get creative and experience in a small way some of the challenges faced by believers who are constantly looking over their shoulder.

1.6 UNDER SURVEILLANCE

This edition of Secret Church explores the idea of digital surveillance. Here are a few optional approaches that you could do to bring this theme closer to home.

Inform your 'churchgoers' in secret ways. Promote your secret church gathering by word of mouth and warn people that further updates on emails, social media and WhatsApp will use code. Many house church gatherings are organised via a phone call rather than posting messages, so call rather than text.

Speak in code. AI technology is becoming more sophisticated in decoding conversations in China. So use codewords online to refer to your meeting.

Plant a secret spy. One of the risks for secret Christians is that one of their group could be a spy. What must it feel like to be covertly spied upon? Well, maybe you might find out...

You could assign someone within the group to be a spy. Their job is to covertly gather information during the meeting and then report back. They could pick on one person, or record lots of people.

Give opportunities for information to be recorded. Perhaps your spy could use their phone to record people or even take photos, while pretending to read the Bible. Try to make moments where he or she has a chance to write something. Then, at the end, reveal that someone has been spying and share what has been discovered. (see section 2.10).

Please be sensitive! We don't want to give people nightmares! So choose 'targets' who you know could cope with this. But this is a way for the group to experience a little of what it is like to have a spy among them, and also think about what evidence in their lives and words would identify them as a Christian.

2.0: THE SESSION

2.1 WELCOME (2 MINS)

Explain: Millions of Christians across the world have never entered a church building. They've never worshipped with hundreds of others, or even sung to God in anything above a whisper.

They are the secret church. And today we're going to imagine a little of what their world is like.

It's a world where you cannot meet at a church. In fact, you don't have a church at all. So you have to meet under the cover of darkness; in caves, forests and cellars; in the middle of night, or early in the morning.

A world where your social media is being scanned for suspicious content, your messages are tapped, your email being monitored.

A world where spyware on your phone might be looking and listening for keywords like 'Bible', 'pray' and 'Jesus'.

2.2 MEET A SECRET CHRISTIAN (5 MINS)

- **Watch the video about Ming* - a secret Bible smuggler in China**

Before you start, show the video about Ming in China. If you are meeting somewhere without any tech, you could ask people to watch it before the meeting. Or they could watch it on their phones, before you start.

2.3 SET THE SCENE (5 MINS)

Get the room ready. Do what you can to increase the sense of secrecy: turn down the lights, draw the curtains, lock the door. Ask people to avoid the windows and to keep their voices down. Choose whatever is appropriate for your setting.

- **Ask the group to get out their phones and set them to silent.** But explain they can use them to read the Bible, or to refer to other information. This will allow your secret spy to use their phone during the meeting.
- **Explain:** We're stepping into the world of secret Christians; a world where Bibles are restricted, where Christians are spied on and where even the mention of Jesus can be costly. But Jesus is present.

- **Ask someone to read Matthew 18:20**

"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Explain: Right now, Jesus is here – how amazing is that? Jesus is still here with us. Let that truth sink in. Jesus is present.

Pray: Ask someone to pray that Jesus would be present during your time together. Ask that He would be present with those around the world who have risked everything to follow Him.

2.4 SHARING BURDENS (8 MINS)

Explain: One Chinese house church used to meet in a huge, darkened, open-plan office at midnight once a week. It's totally illegal. Some of them are quite high-ranking members of the Communist Party. If their faith is discovered, it would end their careers... or worse. Their pastor began each secret meeting with the same question: "What are your wounds for Christ this week?" One by one, the circle would share exactly what following Jesus had cost them that week.

Reflect: What are our wounds for Christ this week?

Ask the group if they can share some of the following:

- What's been difficult and challenging?
- What's been encouraging? Where has God been at work?
- What can you be thankful for from the last week?

Ask someone to read Philipians 4:6

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

End the time with prayer.

- Use this as an opportunity to pray thank you prayers and also thank God for the courage of believers meeting in places like the office space late into the night.

2.5 WHISPER WORSHIP (6 MINS)

Explain: Hea Woo* is from North Korea - like many North Koreans, her story is hard and painful. She spent a few years in a North Korean prison. These are globally notorious places where people can be imprisoned indefinitely and treated horrifically. But despite the darkness of prison, despite mental and physical torture, despite pain and severe hunger, Hea Woo chose to worship.

In fact, she planted a tiny church. The little group of believers met in the only place the guards wouldn't go – the stinking, dirty toilets. And it was there that they could worship, singing Amazing Grace in a tiny whisper or sometimes complete silence,



Image: In China, Ming* has to keep his faith secret. This representative image is taken from a reenactment of his story.

to avoid being heard. Reflecting on that time, Hea Woo said: "Worship and praise is the antidote to discouragement."

- **Spend time whispering the words of a worship song together. Perhaps it will be Amazing Grace. But choose a song that people know well enough to not have the words.**
- **We suggest going fully stripped back with your secret church worship, so no tech and no words on a screen, to try and make this a more unique experience.**

2.6 DEPENDING ON THE WORD (5 MINS)

"I know that God called me to share the gospel by distributing Bibles," says Ming. "I am not allowed to attend church or even own a Bible anymore."

Explain: Think back to the video of Ming (Section 2.2). In parts of China, it's relatively easy to get a physical Bible – but where Ming is from it's much harder, particularly if it's a Bible which has been translated into the language of his ethnic group. Ming goes to great lengths to hide his operations. He loads the Bibles into his car in a hidden alley, and sends a coded text to his contacts: 'I'm on my way to the old place.' 'The old place' is code for a location as Ming assumes that phones are monitored. One wrong word could cost him his freedom.

Ming has counted the cost. He has been arrested before in this severely restricted area. But he knows that his fellow believers are desperate for the Word of God.

Explain: Chinese Christians love the Bible. It is food for the soul. Many learn vast chunks of Scripture by heart. And not just in China. All around the world Christians memorise scripture.

- **Have someone read out these words from a secret believer from Central Asia.**

"When people started to persecute me, I was happy, because I noticed the same pattern in the Bible. I had learned Psalm 150 by heart and when I was in prison and beaten up severely, I

meditated on this psalm. Despite tremendous pressure, I never renounced Christ. God's Word and prison made me stronger."

- **Encourage people in the group to share Scripture from memory – see how many verses you can get altogether.**
- **Ask someone to read Psalm 121.**
- **See if you can learn verses 7-8 by heart and write it down, on a piece of paper or on your phone. (Plenty of opportunities for your secret spy to record evidence!)**

2.7 SHARING COMMUNION (6 MINS)

Include this section if your church tradition allows Communion in the context of your session.

Explain: Brother Andrew, the founder of Open Doors, once visited some secret Christians in a Central Asian country, a place where it was extremely dangerous to be a Christian.

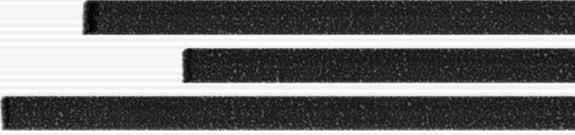
- **Have someone read this short passage:**

"We rode in a 4x4 over very rugged mountain terrain to a secret meeting of Christians in the southern part of the country... After a gruelling number of hours we finally arrived at a nondescript house where the meeting took place. The windows were covered with blankets to hide their activities from prying eyes. There was no heat or electricity; candles and sunlight filtering through blanket cracks provided what light we had. Two women, wives of two of the men, sat in a darkened corner of the room shrouded in their burkas..."

"The primary purpose of this secret meeting was to baptise the 12 men and two women who had gathered there. The meeting began with singing some psalms, led by a former mullah - a Muslim religious leader. He said he wanted to be a 'mullah for Jesus'. As the meeting progressed, each man gave a testimony to his Christian faith."



Image: Hea Woo*, originally from North Korea, now living in South Korea



"In the weeks and months after this secret church meeting many of this group were martyred, paying the ultimate price for Jesus."

Explain: Many have paid a similar price because of their choice to become a Christian. Jesus Himself knows what it's like to go through torture and death. And it's because of Jesus' death and resurrection that we know these brave and courageous believers didn't give up their lives for nothing. As we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus, and those that follow in His footsteps, let's take Communion together. In that Central Asian country it's almost impossible to get wine, so secret believers use grapes.

Hold your grape - and slowly put it in your mouth. Don't bite it! Reflect on the story of the secret gathering that we just heard and think of ways you could live out your faith more bravely. Now bite into your grape. Remember Jesus, the one who paid the ultimate price, the one who is worth the cost. As you bite into the grape and taste the juice - thank Jesus for the blood He shed for you. As you chew on the grape - remember the body of Jesus that was broken for you.

2.8 PRAY IN CODE (8 MINS)

Explain: Imagine having to choose your words carefully when you pray or when you communicate with other Christians. Ming uses code to tell others what he is doing and where to meet. In North Korea, Christians even pray in code, in case anyone hears them talking about God.

- **Spend a few minutes praying for Ming and others like him in code. Pray quietly. You never know who is listening!**

Do not use... Jesus, God, Bible/scripture/Word of God, church, prayer.

Do use... The One, Father, The Book, Family - and come up with your own alternatives.

- **Pray together**
 - Pray that God will protect Ming and bless his work.
 - Pray for more workers like Ming, to meet the demand for the gospel.
 - Pray that Open Doors local partners in China can find creative ways to do their work and minister to believers in the most sensitive areas.
 - Please pray for their protection and wisdom from the Lord to help them make the right decisions.
 - Pray for the hearts of people in China to be open to the gospel.

2.9 WRAPPING UP (3 MINS)

Explain: Psalm 121 says, "He will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore."

Digital surveillance tools are being used against our persecuted brothers and sisters. But this is not stopping them from reaching out to others and sharing the gospel.

Whilst we've experienced some of the issues that secret believers face, the reality is that persecuted Christians face loneliness, exclusion and solitude on a daily basis.

Encourage participants to continue to pray for members of the secret church, especially those who face surveillance.

As the session ends, slowly open the curtains, turn their lights back on and return to our own world.



Image: A baptism service for new believers in India

2.10 THE SPY (10 MINS)

- **If you have decided to make someone a spy, this is the moment to reveal their identity.**

Explain: Secret Christians live with the danger that someone will inform on them. Ming struggled with this.

"I had no one to trust," Ming says. "I felt insecure and isolated. I need to make friends cautiously, since there may be spies pretending to be Christians. I need to stay vigilant."

How would you feel if someone in this room was spying on you?

- Reveal that someone in the room has been secretly keeping notes.
- Ask the group if they noticed anything suspicious during the meeting.
- Have your spy reveal the kinds of things that were said, or play back anything they covertly recorded.
- How might this incriminate the person recorded?
- How do those whose words were recorded feel?
- How would you feel if you couldn't trust the people you were sharing with?

Ming has been able to meet with Hao Ran* - a local Open Doors partner who offers him guidance and support.

"Ming is strong in faith, but I can tell he's been mentally exhausted in this journey," Hao Ran says. "At the beginning, he was so suspicious that he would trust no one. I believe the Holy Spirit moves in his heart and he has been able to develop trust again. Now, he is starting to lead a small group again."

- End by praying for Ming and his small group, and for all Christians who are exhausted and in need of God's help.
- Encourage everyone to learn the memory verses from Psalm 121 and to pray them for the persecuted church.
- As you make your way home, and maybe over the next few days, if you pass security cameras or CCTV cameras, use them as a reminder to pray for all Christians who live under surveillance.

3.1 SESSION TWO: DEBRIEF

After you've run your Secret Church session you may want to follow up with your group in a separate session about their experience. At the beginning of your time, see if anyone can remember the memory verses from Psalm 121. See if anyone can recite them!

Now chat through the following:

- What stuck with you from the secret church experience?
- What story or stories do you remember?
- Has the experience affected or changed the way you worship, pray and read the Bible?
- Has the example of the persecuted church impacted how you live out your own faith?
- Are there any elements of the secret church experience you'd like to repeat? Why? (Feel free to repeat them now.)
- Do you know of any other ways that secret believers from around the world meet?

Explain: For us this was a 'safe' experience. We were role-playing. But for many persecuted believers, this is their life. As a global family we need to continue to pray for and support them.

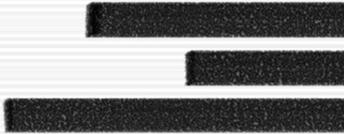
So what now? Here are a few options you can share with your group.

1. Get more incredible stories about courageous and brave faith to inspire your own walk with God and to help you pray. Sign up to receive regular email updates from Open Doors and/or Open Doors Youth and follow Open Doors and Open Doors Youth on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (@opendoorsuk or @opendoorsyouth and @opendoorsyouthuk - on Instagram).

2. Encourage your group to think about giving to support their persecuted church family by visiting opendoorsuk.org/secret-church

- **Every £12** could give Bibles to three believers, so they can meet God in His Word.
- **Every £25** could help encourage secret believers with discipleship training, so they can be effective witnesses for Christ despite persecution and opposition.

You can also fundraise. Loads of churches have done some amazing sponsored challenges. People have shaved heads, baked and delivered cakes, run a marathon together and even taken on the plank pose for as long as possible. Chat about what could you do as a group.



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