

[SECRET] CHURCH

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

LEADER GUIDE

**ONLINE EDITION
TO USE WITH GROUPS
OVER VIDEO CHAT**

[SECRET] CHURCH

**How can you be church, when you have no building?
 How do you worship, when you have to be silent?
 How can you learn from God's Word, when you can't get a Bible?
 How do you pray with others, when religious meetings are banned?**

The COVID-19 crisis has meant we've all experienced what it's like not to be able to meet in a church building or gather in large numbers. But, for millions of Christians across the world, that's what life is like all the time. In many countries, Christians have never entered a physical church building. They have never experienced the buzz of worshipping with hundreds of others, or even sung to God in anything above a whisper.

They are the secret church. They meet under the cover of darkness; in caves, forests and cellars; in the middle of the night, at dawn and on the run from secret police. They gather under the arches of bridges and even meet in stinking toilets in prison camps.

Yet wherever they meet – they find Jesus there. And that's what we can learn from them: that lockdown doesn't mean we are alone; that even though we are separated, we can still be Church.



Image: A secret house-church meeting in North Africa



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

1.1 WHAT IS THIS?

These pages explore some of the ways isolated, hidden and secret Christians do church. We've taken ideas and approaches from underground church meetings all around the world, and translated them into a simple session outline for you to use with your group or church.

The session involves multiple activities and stories, all of which have been designed to work on a video chat service like Zoom or Skype. The session should last around 60 minutes, but feel free to cut out elements, or spend longer than suggested on others – make it work for your group and context. Power Point slides are available too to use during your session.

1.2 WHAT EACH PARTICIPANT WILL NEED

Before you meet, make sure everyone invited to the session has the following stuff to hand:

- A Bible and a pen
- Some sheets of loo roll (it's not for the obvious)
- Some grapes
- A candle (and something to light it with)

1.3 LEADERS: HOW TO PREPARE

Make sure you read through the material beforehand and are aware of what is involved in each of the activities. There are one or two stories, prayer points and other sections that you may want to ask different people to read out or take a lead on. If so, share the relevant pages of this guide with them before the session and ask them to be ready to share, read or pray at the appropriate moment.

Also, take a look at the Power Point slides available on the Secret Church webpage: www.opendoors.org.uk/secretchurch. You may find it helpful to use of these during your main Secret Church session and during the debrief, if you choose to do one of these (see page eight of this guide for details).

1.4 HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

If you run this programme in one session, you should be able to get through the material in around one hour. However, you may find you want to give longer to some sections than we've suggested, or miss out others completely (we've marked a few non-essential sections). 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.

The idea is that you experience some of what it is like to meet as a secret, underground church, and come closer to God in the process. So, use these ideas and adapt them to suit your group and how video chat sessions have been working for you.

1.5 SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE #SECRETCHURCHSELFIE

We'd love you to share your experience of Secret Church with us via social media. You could take a snap-shot of your video chat or a screenshot of your group doing one of the activities (the whisper worship, lighting a candle or writing verses on loo roll would be ace). When you have, post on your social media accounts using the [#secretchurchselfie](https://twitter.com/secretchurchselfie) and tagging [@opendoorsuk](https://twitter.com/opendoorsuk) and [@opendoorsyouth](https://twitter.com/opendoorsyouth) (and [@opendoorsyouthuk](https://twitter.com/opendoorsyouthuk) on Instagram).

2.0: THE SESSION

2.1 WELCOME (2 MINS)

Explain: The COVID-19 crisis has meant we've all experienced what it's like not to be able to meet in a church building or gather in large numbers.

But, believe it or not, for millions of Christians across the world, that's what life is like all the time. In many countries, Christians have never entered a physical 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. They meet under the cover of darkness; in caves, forests and cellars; in the middle of the night, at dawn and on the run from secret police. They gather under the arches of bridges and even meet in stinking toilets in prison camps.

Yet wherever they meet – they find Jesus there. And that's what we can learn from them: that lockdown doesn't mean we are alone, that even though we are separated, we can still be Church.

2.2 HIDE THE EVIDENCE (5 MINS)

Being a secret Christian means you need to get good at hiding all evidence of your faith. Get everyone to do a quick treasure hunt. Give them a minute to search the room or space they are in for any signs of their faith in Jesus. There could be pictures, books, a Bible, worship CDs or even some jewellery.

At the end of the minute ask people to hold up what they have found.

- Who has the most?

Explain: When Mousa, a teenager from Cameroon, was questioning the extremist Islamic faith he had grown up with, a local pastor gave him a Bible. He would read it in secret, hiding it when he went to bed. But one night, his mum found the Bible. Mousa was asleep at the time, but he was woken violently by his mum beating him with a stick. His mum said to him: "If I ever catch you with this book again, no one knows what I will do to you". Mousa fled, fearing what his family would do. He met with the pastor and they discussed the Bible – Mousa soon became a Christian, knowing his choice would mean further isolation from his family.

- **Ask the group to quickly hide all the Christian materials they found, except their Bibles**

2.3 JESUS IS LIKE OXYGEN (OPTIONAL VIDEO: 6 MINS)

- **Show Islèm video. Click here to watch...**

Explain: At this time of lockdown we're reliant on social media and tech to keep us connected. We're not that different to Islèm and other secret Christians who are reliant on technology to connect and grow in their faith.

- **Have someone read out the following quote:**

"Only my mother knows that I am a Christian, and she accepts it. My father does not know anything about it... I thought that, if I said anything more, he would kill me."

Reflect:

- Would you still choose to follow Jesus if you knew it could mean losing your family?

Explain: Islèm made her choice – she simply couldn't live without her new faith. She says: "Jesus is like oxygen, because without oxygen you cannot breathe. If Jesus were not in my life, I wouldn't be here today, I would not be alive."

Reflect:

- What does it mean for Jesus to be our oxygen?
- Are there times when we try to breathe without Jesus?
- Do we really depend on Him as if He were vital to our existence?

2.4 SET THE SCENE (2 MINS)

- **Ask the group to turn down the lights in their rooms, shut the curtains, lock their front doors, stay away from the windows and ensure they won't be interrupted.**

Explain: We're going to be 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. It may feel like a lonely and isolated experience, but it isn't. Jesus is present.

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

Explain: As we meet right now, Jesus is here – how amazing is that? Even though we're in different rooms and different places, Jesus is still here with us. Let that truth sink in. Jesus is present.

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



Image: Pastor Alim from Central Asia prays after his church was refused registration

2.5 SHARING BURDENS (8 MINS)

Explain: One Chinese house church pastor used to begin each secret meeting by asking everyone: “What are your wounds for Christ this week?” Gradually, one by one, the circle of Christians would share their experiences of cost and hardship because of their faith in Jesus. These Christians had an expectation that following Jesus would come at a cost.

Reflect:

- What are our wounds for Christ this week?

Explain: Right now, in Wuhan (where the coronavirus outbreak began) and in other Chinese house churches, church meetings often start with a time of sharing how people are coping, or not coping. Like us now, this is done via video chat. One believer said:

“It’s a critical time of connection. Everyone is in a different situation, and it’s important to be compassionate and not pretend we’re unafraid. We try to be a safe space. Christ is meeting us where we are – even if we are sad and lonely, or fearful and worried.”

Let’s follow their example.

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 Philippians 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 of sharing with this simple prayer.**
Jesus, thank You that You know what we are facing and that You are with us no matter what we face. Thank You that we can give You our worries and concerns. Help us focus on You and always depend on You. Amen.

2.6 WHISPER WORSHIP (6 MINS)

Explain: Fed up with singing along to worship via a screen? Anyone had the awkward experience of leaving their mic on during the worship time? Well, don’t panic, that won’t happen now. We’re going to spend a bit of time worshipping in whispers.

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, to avoid being heard.

Reflecting on that time, Hea Woo said: “Worship and praise is the antidote to discouragement.”

Worship helped them lift their gaze to Jesus – to see beyond the pain, the injustice, the fear and the smell. Worship simply refreshed their souls.

Then, after a few minutes, the meeting would end and the women would return to their work.

- **As a response, spend time whispering the words of Amazing Grace together. Put the words up on the video chat screen if you can. If things get too loud, ‘sshhh’ people!**

OPTIONAL VIDEO

- **If you have time, click here to watch the video of Hea Woo singing Amazing Grace.**



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

2.7 DEPENDING ON THE WORD (10 MINS)

Ask:

- How many Bibles could you gather from around your house right now?

Give people a few minutes and see who has the most.

Explain: The Bible is an essential part of a secret church gathering. Sharing and learning from God's Word is key, even if a Bible isn't actually available. Confused?

Gideon, a Christian from Eritrea, knows just how precious the Bible is. He spent time in prison because of his faith in Jesus. He was even asked to sign a document in which he would have to agree to not read the Bible, pray or meet with more than one other person. Gideon refused.

Have someone read out these words from Gideon...

"They beat every part of my body... until I almost died. I was thinking of Jesus. What an honour for me to share His affiliation. I remember I said to myself inside, 'Lord, please forgive them. They don't know what they are doing to me, but I give You my soul to rest in Your hand.'

"They took us to the prison again. After three months, we had a Bible smuggled in without their knowledge. We tore the pages out of different Bible books and we distributed those to different cells.

"We chose four believers to take responsibility to do distribution of the parts of the Bible. I was one of those four chosen believers and it was my responsibility to coordinate all these things. Because there is no paper in the prison cells, I was using toilet paper to write verses of the Bible and send them to others. When the government agents searched our cell, they found all those verses that I had been writing. They asked 'Who sent those papers, those verses?' When they found it was me, they put me under severe torture for months. There was no part of my body without pain.

"One of the persecutors asked me a question. 'Why you are paying so big a price? Why don't you renounce your faith and live a peaceful life?' I replied, 'To me, the Word of God is life!'"

Explain: Around the world, Christians like Gideon know that God's Word is life. Many memorise whole passages. In the late 1970s in Vietnam (a country that is still ruled by a strict communist regime today), Bibles were very scarce, but demand from underground, secret Christians was high. One church, knowing their stocks were limited, would only give a Bible to someone if they could memorise the whole of Psalm 119 – all 176 verses!

Across Central Asia, churches and Christians are often monitored by the state, and converts from Muslim backgrounds can face intense pressure to leave Christianity if their faith is discovered.

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

"My life was miserable and I tried to commit suicide several times. Then I got to know God through the lives of a Christian family. When I saw how they related to each other, I discovered hope. Finally, I accepted Jesus and within one month I quit all my bad habits: drinking, drug use, violence. All the emptiness in my life disappeared. I was filled by God's love. 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."

Ask the group to write down one verse each on piece of toilet roll. If they aren't sure what to write, get them to look up Psalm 119 or Psalm 150 and choose a verse from there. Then ask them to share their verses by holding up the loo roll to the screen. If you have time, go round some or all of the group and ask why they chose that passage. When you've finished, challenge them to memorise the verse this week, flushing away the scrap of loo roll when they know it by heart!



Image: A baptism service for new believers in India

2.8 SHARING COMMUNION* (6 MINS)

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. For the next few hours we were transported into a world few have experienced...

"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.

"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 can't share communion like we do in the UK. Instead, they use grapes.

Hold your grape - and slowly put it in your mouth. Don't bite it just yet. 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.

2.9 PRAYER – LIGHT A CANDLE (8 MINS)

Explain: In 2016, a group of Christians in a country in the Gulf region received a warning: an Islamic extremist group was planning attacks on churches. Despite the risks, this group met for a quiet time of worship. They would usually hold candles as they sang, but on this occasion nobody lit a candle.

After a few moments, a six-year-old girl lit her candle, then went around the room with her candle and lit everyone else's. A woman asked her why they needed to be lit. The little girl replied:

"Because the candles remind us that even in the darkness of the tomb, there was the hope of Jesus' promise. When Jesus makes a promise it is like a candle given to us when the lights go out. It is a promise that the lights will come back on again."

It is a promise that all Christians – wherever we are – need to hold on to.

Light your candle as a reminder that in the darkness, Jesus' light is still with us and that He is still with secret and isolated Christians around the world.

With your candles lit, open up this next few minutes to prayers from the group.

You could pray for:

- Isolated believers struggling to find a Christian community to support them. Pray that they would be able to connect with other believers for support and encouragement.
- Those in prison because of their faith in Jesus. Pray for strength, freedom and that they would know God's presence like never before.
- Those dealing with trauma or experiences of violence and loss. Ask God would bring them comfort and peace.
- Those vulnerable Christians suffering during the global coronavirus lockdown. Pray for provision and support.
- The church to keep shining God's love and light, even in the darkest of situations.
- Your group. That they would be inspired by the example of brave and courageous persecuted Christians to live out their faith with greater boldness and passion.

3.0: DEBRIEF

2.10 HOPE REMAINS (OPTIONAL WRAPPING UP STORY - 6 MINS)

Explain: Being church at home is a challenge for us all. But it also gives us a glimpse of what life is like for the secret church. Because, for millions of Christians across the world, this is their 'normal'.

One of the things which we are discovering in lockdown is the power of digital communications to bring us together as church. But this is nothing new to secret believers who have been using these tools for years.

In Iran, even the covert house church meetings are now impossible in lockdown. So, like us in the UK, Christians in Iran are going online.

"We created a special prayer schedule that we call 'Frontline' where prayer members can virtually walk in and out to come to pray together," says Open Doors partner Salomeh.

"Our people are sitting at home now all day long. We help them to overcome fear and anxiety and spend extra time with them individually. Apart from teaching, prayer and worship sessions, we also have group meetings in which we share our testimonies to help us deal with the reality of these days."

"Your support and prayers result in the growth of the Kingdom," says Salomeh. "The church in Iran is still alive. I pray that one day we will all be standing in front of God's throne knowing we've done our part in the Kingdom."

2.11 ENDING WELL (1 MINUTE)

Explain: Whilst we've experienced some of the isolation that secret believers face during the current lockdown, the reality is that persecuted Christians face loneliness, exclusion and solitude on a daily basis.

As the session ends, ask the group to slowly open their curtains, turn their lights back on and emerge back into their normal worlds.



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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 who managed to memorise the verses that you wrote down on loo roll. Ask people if they could recite the verses to prove they have learnt 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: Whilst we know that the lockdown has been a temporary experience for us in the UK, for many persecuted believers, isolation, fear, lack and exclusion are normal. The experiences we've had in lockdown have drawn us closer to them and their incredible and courageous faith. But as a global family we need to continue to pray and support them.

So what now? Here are a few options you can share with your group (share the 'what now?' Power Point slide available on the Secret Church webpage or send round this link to people in the group chat: www.opendoorsuk.org/secretideas).

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 www.opendoorsuk.org/act/donate/secret-believers

- Every £10 could mean five people are reached by the church through social media.
- Every £19 could provide vital Bibles for 15 believers from a Muslim background.

You can also fundraise. Loads of churches have done some amazing sponsored challenges during the lockdown. 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.

More ideas and inspo at www.opendoorsuk.org/secretideas