



 **OpenDoors**

## **WORLD WATCH LIST REPORT 2021**

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THE PERSECUTION OF  
CHRISTIANS:

Key facts. Key trends.  
Key actions.

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**Cover Photo:** Plateau State, Nigeria. On 7 April 2020, Rose’s pastor husband Matthew was killed by Fulani militants. She returned from a visit to the maternity clinic to find her husband lying dead with the grave already dug.

Far from the deceased husband’s family taking care of his widow and children, Rose’s in-laws confiscated her livestock, food and everything else of value. She was left empty-handed and grieving.

Then the Nigerian government’s coronavirus lockdown meant Rose lost any opportunity she had to make money to buy food.

Christians found themselves the last in line for help. “We were happy when the government announced food aid for the poor. But we were left out. We received none of that food,” says Rose. “All our hopes were dashed...”

Open Doors partners were able to bring a relief package to Rose shortly after she gave birth to her third daughter.

This report was written by Stephen Rand on the basis of research material produced by the Open Doors International World Watch Research Unit.

# Introduction

In Central Asia early in 2020, a team from one of Open Doors partner organisations was distributing basic supplies during lockdown. As evening approached they realised there was one house they had not yet reached. They were concerned about breaking curfew and that their car might draw unwelcome attention from neighbours. But they prayed and decided to go anyway.

When they arrived they found a couple outside holding hands and praying, with the children inside. As they pulled up, the husband looked at them with tears in his eyes and said, “We have nothing. We were crying out to the Lord to give us something to give our children to eat tonight – and then you arrived.”

This is one of many stories that have haunted me in 2020. Lockdown meant daily wage earners were unable to work. Church leaders depend on the weekly collection – if their parishioners have no money, neither do they. The church was literally at risk of starving to death.

And Covid-19 placed yet more weapons in the hands of the persecutors. Christians have been discriminated against in the distribution of food aid in so many countries I have lost count. Violent attacks against Christians by Islamic extremists have increased significantly across sub-Saharan Africa. The pandemic has legitimised increased surveillance by totalitarian governments, with China leading the way. And nationalism driven by religious identity is increasing in countries such as India and Turkey.

Amidst all this, the new government in Sudan has brought changes, which give welcome glimmers of hope.

This annual World Watch List Report highlights the facts and figures. And of course, these things don't only happen to Christians. It is tragic and unacceptable that they happen to anyone, whatever their faith or none. Christians will only be freed from persecution when freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) is guaranteed for all.

Throughout this global crisis we have seen churches providing comfort and life-saving support to their communities, Christian or not. From Sri Lanka to Iraq we hear how local faith actors make a positive difference. This report tells some of those stories. So while faith makes people vulnerable, that faith is also the driving force behind people who have proved to be a critical part of the solution. Open Doors is calling on the UK government to recognise the enormous value of working through local faith actors and to do whatever it takes to make this possible.

We have welcomed the UK government's commitment to implement the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's Review and are encouraged by the progress that has been made. The new UK Forum on FoRB gives us an important platform to make common cause with stakeholders from all faiths and none to ensure that Article 18 remains on the government's agenda.

Thank you for reading this report. And thank you for each and every positive action for those facing persecution that you take as a result.



**Henrietta Blyth**  
Open Doors UK & Ireland CEO

# The Top Ten

## The ten countries where it is most difficult and dangerous to be a Christian in 2021

### 1 NORTH KOREA

Anyone identified as a Christian risks being deported to a labour camp as a political criminal or even killed on the spot; their families will share their fate. After the meetings between Kim Jong-un and President Trump, control tightened again, particularly near the border, which was closed because of the pandemic.

### 2 AFGHANISTAN

All Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and dare not live their faith openly. Leaving Islam is considered shameful and punishable by death under the prevailing Islamic law. If exposed as Christians, converts have to flee or be killed – the family, clan or tribe has to save its 'honour'.

### 3 SOMALIA

Islamic extremist group al-Shabaab has stated it wishes to eradicate Christians from the country. Somali Christians come from a Muslim background. Any conversion to Christianity is seen as a betrayal of the family and clan – suspected converts will be harassed, intimidated and even killed.

### 4 LIBYA

Libyan Christians with a Muslim background face violent and intense pressure from their family and the wider community to renounce their faith. Those from other parts of Africa are also targeted by various Islamic militant and organised criminal groups. Some Christians have been brutally killed.

### 5 PAKISTAN

Officially a Muslim state, all Christians suffer from institutionalised discrimination: occupations seen as dirty are reserved for Christians. Blasphemy laws encourage the targeting of all religious minorities. Underage girls can be subject to abduction, forced conversion and forced marriage. The pandemic saw aid being provided to some Christians on condition they converted to Islam.

### 6 ERITREA

The government has refused to recognise any religious group except the Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches, and Islam. Many hundreds of Christians from other church groups have been arrested and imprisoned. In June 2020, 30 people attending a wedding were detained.

### 7 YEMEN

Most Christians come from a Muslim background and need to live their faith in secret. They risk detention and interrogation from the authorities. Radical Islamic groups threaten them with death if they do not re-convert; the tribal punishment for conversion can be death or banishment. Emergency relief distribution is allegedly discriminating against all not considered to be devout Muslims.

### 8 IRAN

Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of persecution. Leaders of Christian convert groups have received long prison sentences for 'crimes against national security'. Exorbitant sums are demanded for bail. In July 2020, \$150,000 was set for house church leader Joseph Shahbazian, arrested with around 35 other Christians.

### 9 NIGERIA

Christians are more at risk of violent attack in Nigeria than in any other country. More than 3,000 were killed in 2020, the level of violence described as 'unprecedented'. Many radical Islamist groups are spreading havoc both within and outside of Nigeria.

### 10 INDIA

Hindu nationalists insist that India is a Hindu nation. Converts to Christianity from a Hindu background are constantly under pressure to reconvert; they are often physically assaulted and sometimes killed. The recent proposal of further anti-conversion laws is unhelpful and may unleash further violence against Christians.

# Key findings

## The key findings in this report are:

- The persecution of Christians continues to worsen. **In Open Doors' World Watch List Top 50 alone, 309 million Christians face very high or extreme levels of persecution and discrimination** for their faith – an increase of 19 per cent since last year
- **Globally, the number is even higher** – more than 340 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith
- This year, for the first time ever, **all top 50 countries score levels of at least very high**

“More than 340 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith”

**persecution**; the top 12 scoring **extreme** levels of persecution, up from 11 the year before. Beyond the top 50, four more

countries also score **very high**. Overall, 74 countries — one more than last year – showed **extreme, very high or high** levels of persecution, affecting at least 1 in every 8 Christians worldwide; 1 in 6 in Africa; 2 in 5 in Asia, and 1 in 12 in Latin America

- **The total number of Christians killed for their faith rose by 60 per cent to 4,761** – 3,530 of these were in Nigeria
- **The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated existing social, economic and structural vulnerabilities.** Christians from West Africa to Yemen suffered discrimination over access to Covid relief. In India, 80 per cent of those receiving aid from Open Doors partners had been excluded from official distribution
- **There was an increase in domestic vulnerability during lockdown**, particularly for Christian converts and women. Reports of the kidnapping, forcible conversion and forced marriage of women and girls increased
- **Islamic militancy exploited Covid-19 restrictions to gain ground in sub-Saharan Africa.** Militants increased violent attacks

across the region, exploiting the inability or unwillingness of governments to protect vulnerable communities. Nigeria (9) has entered the list of the top ten countries for the first time since 2015

- **In Latin America, Covid-19 restrictions enabled organised criminal groups to extend their control**, for instance in Colombia (30) and Mexico (37)
- **Nationalism linked to and driven by majority religious identity continues to rise** in countries such as India (10) and Turkey (25). This is stoking the fires of persecution as Christians are stigmatised as unpatriotic, belonging to a faith group characterised as ‘foreign’ or ‘Western’

## The key changes in this year's World Watch List are:

- **Iraq** has risen from (15) to (11), partly due to the ongoing insecurity of Christians returning to their homes. Christians continue to be killed, kidnapped and subjected to physical, psychological, sexual and emotional abuse
- **China** (17) is in the top 20 for the first time in a decade. The Communist Party extended its regulation of all religions in 2020, and even government-approved churches, both Catholic and Protestant, are under ever-more surveillance, both online and offline
- But there is hope. **Sudan** (13) abolished the death penalty for apostasy. Its 2019 interim constitution guarantees freedom of religion, omits Sharia as its primary source of law and no longer specifies Islam as its state religion. While there has been significant resistance to such sweeping changes after 30 years, it has dropped from (7) to (13) in the list
- The three new entries to the World Watch List top 50 are all from sub-Saharan Africa: **Democratic Republic of Congo** (40), **Mozambique** (45) and **Comoros** (50)



### Local faith actors make a difference

“Our government does try to help people in need,” Hana says. “But some of our most remote communities have been neglected when they were identified as Christians.”

Hana is an Open Doors partner in an Asian country – we can’t name the country or give Hana’s real name for the sake of her safety. She’s already helping hundreds of Christian families get the vital food, medicine and financial assistance they need.

“We distribute this aid to Christian pastors and leaders who are being sidelined and ignored,” says Hana. “Each parcel is a point of hope and mercy for their communities. They contain enough food and soap to get families through at least two months. We have planned a few dozen more of these distributions.”

# The pandemic and persecution

## Covid-19 exacerbates existing social, cultural, economic and other structural vulnerabilities

The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the existing social, economic and ethnic vulnerabilities of millions of Christians worldwide. It appears to be a catalyst for often-hidden attitudes of oppression and repression to surface in discriminatory acts or expression, such as online hate speech.

In **India**, of more than 100,000 Christians receiving aid from Open Doors partners, 80 per cent reported to World Watch List researchers that they were dismissed from food distribution points. Some walked miles and hid their Christian identity to get food elsewhere. Another 15 per cent received food aid, but reported discrimination such as lack of daily work from government, landowners or industry. Before the pandemic, a government survey had found



In **Nepal** some Christians have been deliberately overlooked in the distribution of government aid simply because of their faith. "During this pandemic, I had no work and no way of earning money. It was so difficult to find enough to live on. Thank you so much Open Doors for helping me and my family." – Maya

that unemployment is greater among Christians than other religious groups – so refusal of food aid left whole communities destitute.

## “Some Christians said their food ration cards had been torn up”

This was echoed across the world. Reports from **Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Central Asia, Malaysia, North Africa, Yemen** and **Sudan** indicate that Christians in rural areas were denied aid. Sometimes this was by government officials; more often it was by village heads and committees or other local authorities. Some Christians said their food ration cards had been torn up or waved away.

In southern Kaduna, **Nigeria**, families from several villages said they received just one-sixth of the rations allocated to Muslim families.

In Nghê An Province in north **Vietnam**, eight families were excluded by the local authorities from receiving Covid-19 relief aid provided by the government. When the believers asked why, the authorities replied, "Because you are Christians. But if you deny your faith by signing a document, we will support you more than any other families in the village." The families refused.

After they first became Christians the local authorities had cut them off from the government-funded subsidy programme for low-income families. They now have to pay school fees for their children and their medical insurance themselves, despite being entitled to government support. They no longer receive aid during the Vietnamese New Year nor their annual stipend (about £120) for protecting the forest.

Covid-19 has affected the livelihood of church leaders. Many are not paid salaries but expect financial support from their communities' donations. When church services stop, donations drop – by about 40 per cent, said leaders ranging from Egypt to Latin America.

Converts to Christianity from a majority religion highlighted that lockdown meant being confined at home with family members who are often highly antagonistic, or even extremely hostile, to their beliefs. This domestic vulnerability especially affected women and children. For millions, work, education and other outside interests usually provide respite from scrutiny and attack, as well as from physical, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse at home – but not during lockdown. The number of women reporting psychological violence increased.

Reports of the kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriage of women and girls also increased. A typical case is that of devout Egyptian Christian Rania Abdel-Masih, a 39-year-old mother of three daughters, who volunteered for a well-known Christian-Muslim project. After disappearing in April en route to meet her sister, she turned up on Muslim Brotherhood-linked website videos wearing the niqab, saying she'd been a Muslim for nine years. Looking anxious, she was clearly speaking under duress. Three months later, after media coverage and diplomacy by the Coptic Church, she was able to return to her family, insisting she had never converted to Islam.

### **Covid-19 helps organised criminal groups in Central and Latin America to consolidate their control**

In **Mexico**, the fight to contain the pandemic stretches the ability of national and local institutions to deal with organised crime. Across four regions, drug-trafficking groups imposed their own Covid-19-related curfews. Church leaders who challenge them can face extortion, ambush and robbery; some have been shot and even killed. Many of these groups build political and social capital by bridging the gap in government services of food, education and jobs. In some provinces such as Guerrero, despite the government ban on religious services during quarantine, criminal groups threatened to kill priests who did not perform them.

In **Colombia**, in several places where guerrillas and paramilitaries control rural areas, Christian

pastors were forced to guard the entry and exit points of these areas to prevent virus transmission. This undermined the pastors' credibility with their congregations.

### **Islamic militancy exploits Covid-19 restrictions to gain ground in sub-Saharan Africa**

In the Sahel region immediately south of the Sahara Desert, Islamist extremism is fuelled by injustice and poverty. Jihadists exploit the failures of fragile governments; their militias spread propaganda and scale-up recruitment and violent attacks. Some groups pledged to wage jihad against the 'infidels', claiming that it was because of them that 'Allah punishes us all' with the pandemic.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, Christians faced levels of violence up to 30 per cent higher than last year. The total number of Christians killed in this region rose by 270 per cent to 4,216; excluding Nigeria, the increase is 290 per cent. This is in contrast to other parts of the world, where restrictions and curfews often meant a drop in violence against Christians. Several hundred mostly Christian villages in Nigeria were either occupied or ransacked by armed Fulani herdsmen, with many fields and crops being destroyed in an apparent 'scorched earth' strategy.

A UNHCR official said that the central Sahel – **Mali**, **Burkina Faso** and **Niger** – is the epicentre of the world's fastest-growing displacement and protection crisis. In Burkina Faso, until recently known for its inter-religious harmony, one million people – 1 in 20 of the population – are displaced (and millions more

**"Across sub-Saharan Africa, Christians faced levels of violence that were up to 30 per cent higher"**

hungry) as a result of drought, as well as violence. Conflict prevented Christians in more than 1,000 villages from voting in November's election. Last year **Burkina Faso** jumped onto the World Watch List Top 50 for the first time. This year, Islamists continue to target churches (14 killed in one attack, 24 in another). In **Mali**, Western Christian hostages are still held, and executed.

The devastating impact of Covid-19 helps to convince unemployed youths to exploit ethnic, tribal and religious conflicts over land, resources and politics. Add to this Islamic extremism in failing states, where police and security forces offer little or no protection, and violence is exerted with impunity. Trafficking in humans and arms is rife. Human Rights Watch reports that, despite Covid-19 closures, there were more than 85 attacks on education outlets in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger between January and July 2020. Christians reported that lockdown made them 'sitting targets,' as security forces appeared to collude with the marauders on motorbikes.

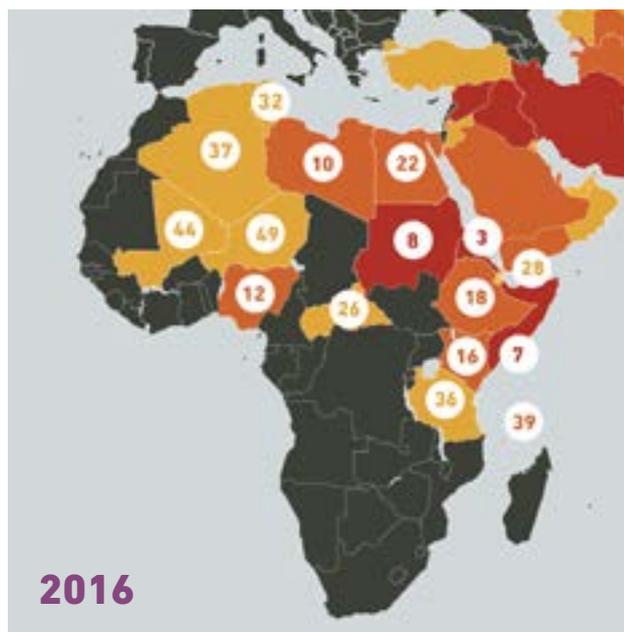
The leader of Nigeria-based Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, continues to build synergies between its factions, extremist Fulani militants and criminal gangs, exploiting failures of governance across northern Nigeria. Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State of West Africa, were responsible for some 400 violent incidents in **Cameroon's** far north – a 90 per cent increase on the previous 12 months; 234 of these incidents were against civilians.

In East Africa, **Mozambique** faces violence by a branch of Islamic State Central Africa Province,

popularly called Al Shabaab but distinct from the Somali group. They aim to impose sharia across the mineral-rich, but least developed northern province bordering Tanzania. Cabo Delgado has since 2017 suffered more than 1,150 deaths in 600 attacks, with more than 300,000 displaced.

The group Anwar al Sunna is inspired by the mastermind behind the Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam US Embassy bombings. It has attacked Christian villages across the border in **Tanzania**, where the autocratic President Magufuli won a landslide election victory in October. Tanzania's population is one-third Muslim, and violence erupted at the election in strongly Islamic Zanzibar. There is every possibility that Islamist-inspired destabilisation could severely impact the lives of Christians in Tanzania.

The **Democratic Republic of Congo** (DRC) is plagued by its own Islamic State-linked group, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Earlier, it sought to overthrow the Ugandan government, but once it was driven into the DRC, it settled in North Kivu Province. Here ADF has almost total control over vast rural areas, where for years it has attacked Christian-run schools and clinics, burned down churches and killed



In 2016, 16 African countries scored high, very high or extreme levels of persecution on the World Watch List. Five years later, in 2021, 32 African countries score high, very high or extreme levels of persecution, including 13 countries that fall outside the top 50



A Christian village in Cameroon that was attacked by Boko Haram. When a mainly Christian community is attacked, some are killed, seriously wounded or kidnapped. Often men and boys are murdered, while women and girls are abducted. Many flee from their houses and fields. Their properties are robbed; their harvests destroyed or their fields are taken over. When they return, there is always the fear it will happen again

community leaders. A 2020 UN report suggests ADF – which has killed more than 1,000 DRC civilians since the start of 2019 – might have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

**Ethiopia** (60 per cent Christian and 34 per cent Muslim) is under pressure from ethno-political groups with religious undertones, and vulnerable to political Islam, with powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran vying for regional influence.

The pandemic has created opportunities for Islamic extremist groups to contend with governments weakened and distracted by their attempts to contain and control the disease. There is an urgent need for co-ordinated inter-governmental action to counteract the violent spread of a new caliphate.

# China – surveillance, control and coercion

The world has been increasingly aware that China is abusing the freedom of religion or belief of significant numbers of its people. It is estimated that as many as 1.8 million Uyghurs are being held in labour/ re-education camps. And more than 500,000 rural Tibetans are being subjected to a similar programme of indoctrination and retraining for menial labour.

The Christian church in China, now numbering nearly 100 million people, is facing a level of persecution and attempted control not seen for many years. The government will be well aware of the rapid growth of the church – if it continues at the rate that it has for the past 40 years then it will reach nearly 300 million by 2030, and close to 600 million by 2040.

This may explain why the government has become so actively interested in what happens inside churches. The overall supervision of religious affairs has been moved to a more senior and powerful Communist Party organisation, the United Front Work Department. Their representatives are meeting church leaders and underlining what is expected of them.

**“Every time I preach now I am expected to praise the government rather than Jesus, and I don't like it”**

This involves a very clear ideological pressure. The policy of 'Sinicising' the church is being implemented across the country. Church leaders are expected to be 'country-loving' people and 'promote socialist values'. A pastor said recently, “Every time I preach now I am expected to praise the government rather than Jesus, and I don't like it.”

In Shandong and increasingly elsewhere, churches must display government-prepared posters with Bible verses illustrating the 12 principles: prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship.

The Bible is therefore subject to this so-called 'rectifying' of religion. It results, for example, in a

twisted re-telling of the New Testament incident when religious leaders drag a woman in front of Jesus, intending to stone her for adultery. Jesus challenges them and they leave. But in an official ethics textbook, the story doesn't end there. When her accusers have left, Jesus then stones the woman himself, saying, “I too am a sinner. But if the law could only be executed by men without blemish, the law would be dead.”

These attempts to direct and control what happens in churches are backed by increasingly pervasive technology. The new restrictions on Internet, social media, NGOs and the 2018 regulations on religion are strictly applied – and all severely limit people's freedom.

China maintains it moved decisively to contain Covid-19; this certainly involved a significant increase in digital surveillance. It reaches into the homes of Chinese Christians, tracks online and off-line interaction and even scans their faces into the Public Security database.

Of China's estimated 570 million CCTV cameras, millions have advanced facial recognition software linked to the country's 'Social Credit System'. This also monitors perceived 'loyalty' and any dissension from the Communist creed. Reports from counties in Henan and Jiangxi provinces say such cameras are now in all state-approved religious venues.

In February, at the height of the epidemic, the Religious Affairs Bureau of the north-eastern province of Jilin demanded that religious departments across the province investigate house churches. Encouraged by success in controlling Covid-19, local officials want to link health apps to incorporate social-credit points. As feared, social credits are already, in places, linked to religion.

Communist Party officials in Shanxi, Henan, Jiangxi, Shandong and other provinces have threatened to withdraw social-welfare benefits, including pensions, if Christians refuse to replace Christian



China (17) is in the top 20 of the World Watch List for the first time in a decade. Christians are watched as never before; many churches now have surveillance cameras installed. The government is making unprecedented attempts to control the content of church services

imagery such as crosses with pictures of President Xi Jinping. Churches that resort to online services are vulnerable to monitoring; even churches affiliated with the government-registered Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council were ordered to stop online services.

### “Thousands of churches have been closed and dozens of pastors arrested”

“The government monitors people across the country,” said the director of a government-approved church in the eastern province of Shandong. Parents have been told in no uncertain terms that they cannot take their children to church; the children are turned back at the door if that happens. When a woman took her child into a registered church in Shandong, it was seen on CCTV, and officials immediately reprimanded the church.

The ban on under-18s from any religious activity has been in force since 2018. The 'Sinicization' (or 'China-fication') of Christianity was amplified and extended on 1 February 2020 by new rules that govern the organisation of religion, selection of leaders and hiring staff. The result is that both registered Three-Self Movement churches and unregistered 'house churches' increasingly experience harassment. This includes arresting and fining church leaders and confiscating property and Christian materials, including Bibles. Thousands of churches have been closed and dozens of pastors arrested.

Many young Christians have begun to experience

persecution for the first time. The new laws have forced their youth meetings to go underground. “They use different locations, such as coffee shops, parks or even homes of the believers,” says an Open Doors partner. “The meetings are smaller so they can be more mobile, and can stay invisible to the authorities.”

They have also begun to experience more persecution at school. “Whenever there is a registration or enrolment needing a form to be filled, the teachers try to persuade them to identify themselves as 'non-religious' whenever they are asked about their religion. Those who insist on putting down 'Christianity', may be threatened with not getting a good grade or a graduation certificate,” he said.

In late 2020, the Vatican extended by two years a 2018 agreement with the Communist Party. Details are secret but it is believed it gives the party 'the power to appoint Catholic bishops, pending the Pope's final approval'. Before the extension, priests in Jiangxi province were forbidden from 'engaging in any religious activity in the capacity of clergy', after they refused to join the government-approved Catholic Patriotic Association. They were monitored in their homes. To avoid detection, some underground churches hold Mass only once every six months.

2021 marks the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. It will almost certainly also be the year when Christians finally outnumber Party members.





### **Amina, Nigeria**

Amina is one of many who wear the scars of the Islamic insurgency in Nigeria. In 2012 Boko Haram came to her house in Maiduguri. Her husband Daniel was slaughtered in front of the family; her two eldest sons were slashed across their necks and left to die.

Then, in 2017, Boko Haram attacked the van she was travelling in. Five men were killed. Amina received three gunshot wounds, and was kidnapped and held hostage for eight months.

In 2020 Open Doors partners continued to support Amina and her children by helping her complete the construction of her house. They also provided her with essential food items during the Covid-19 outbreak.

She says, "Christians are still suffering, because the attacks are still happening every day... The killings are still increasing."

# Nigeria: the slaughter continues

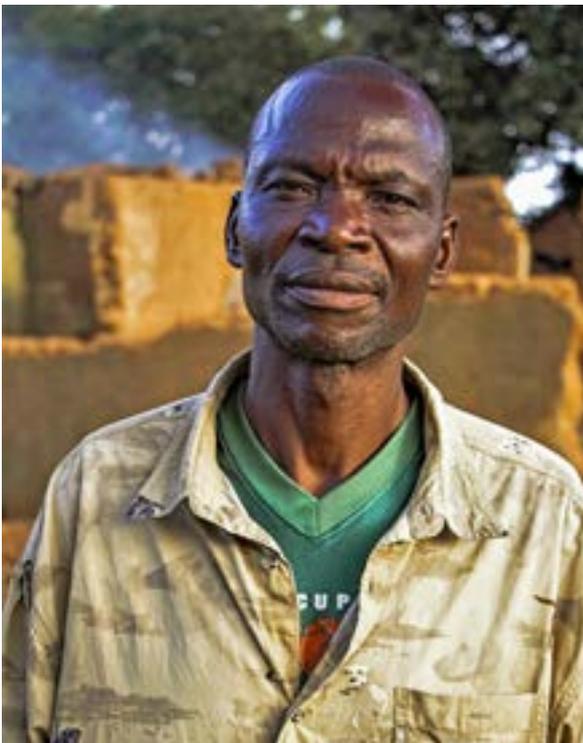
Nigeria is now (9) on the World Watch List. Nigerian Christians are experiencing devastating violence, with attacks by armed groups of Islamist Fulani herders, resulting in the killing, maiming, dispossession and eviction of thousands. Our research echoes the findings of the 2020 report on Nigeria from the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief: violence in northern Nigeria is escalating.

The ten Nigerian Christians beheaded on Christmas Day 2019 by Islamic State West Africa Province, were

tragically just a few of the 3,530 who were murdered. That number is significantly up from 1,350 the previous year. Armed Fulani herders laid waste to several hundred Christian villages; Boko Haram and

**“The violence continues unabated and the attacks have reached an unprecedented level”**

a range of criminal Islamist groups continue to kill, kidnap and rape with impunity. If the World Watch List was based simply on the prevalence of violence against Christians, then Nigeria would be at no. 1.



Despite Covid-19 lockdowns, the continuing attacks against Christians drive people into makeshift camps. In May 2020 at least 1,500 people sought refuge after their villages were attacked.

“At about 3.30am we were asleep at home when we heard the sound of gunshots. We got up and realised that some Fulani were attacking our community,” said Pastor Jeremiah (pictured, name changed for security reasons). They burned down his house and everything he owned.

The villagers who escaped were unable to bring anything with them. The situation in this camp and the surrounding area was deteriorating rapidly. The children were deeply traumatised. “Even if we get food, we hardly eat because we are worried. We really need help,” said a young boy named John. “Right now, we don’t even have mats to sleep on. We sleep on the floor.”

All in the camp live in fear every day that the Fulani will return. “Because of the fear in me, my heart is troubled. I always feel they will come back and kill me,” said one.

There were growing food shortages, but in July Open Doors partners delivered urgent relief aid that was met with singing and dancing. In addition Open Doors has provided food, soap, rent assistance and spiritual support to more than 9,000 families in Nigeria over recent months.

A priest in Nigeria's Kaduna state said, "For four years, since I became a priest in 2016, I have been burying my parishioners."

The increase and spread of attacks to Nigeria's north-western region – and the inability of the government to restore security – has created opportunities for other criminal groups who seek to create a foothold.

**“In times of crisis, local faith actors such as churches often are the first responders”**

“The violence continues unabated and the attacks have reached an unprecedented level, in terms of intensity, modus operandi, the multiple actors and the large geographical scope,” says Illia Djadi, Open Doors Senior Analyst for Freedom of Religion or Belief in sub-Saharan Africa.

He argues that a new approach is needed and highlights the role of local faith actors, such as church leaders. They are strategically placed to help support victims and ultimately solve the problems at a community level. “Local people trust them and they

are often involved in peacebuilding efforts among communities.”

Communities turn to churches in times of need – not only for prayer, but for food and medication. “In times of crisis, LFAs such as churches often are the first responders. They have access to networks that give them a 'logistical edge' in terms of distributing aid,” Djadi says. The Covid-19 pandemic indicated this very clearly. “The nation-wide lockdown prevented people from going out to feed their families and made them more vulnerable to attacks by militants.”

During the pandemic Open Doors, through its local partners, has been able to deliver emergency aid to 15,000 families in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, Niger, Ethiopia, and Mozambique.

“If we could encourage international agencies to support LFAs, to increase their capacity and make sure the aid reaches the actual victims, that would go a long way to helping Nigeria out of this quagmire,” Djadi says.

# Iraq – the critical role of local faith actors

Persecution in the form of discrimination, threats and even attacks is a part of life for Iraqi Christians. There is peace of a kind in the country – but the level of violence faced by Christians has increased sharply in the past year, and the widespread instability is a catalyst for ongoing persecution. Iraq is now at (11) in the World Watch List, up from (15) last year.

**“The church is very near to people – they know people’s needs, of all types – they are with the people”**

Christians from a Muslim background often keep their faith secret, because of the pressure and threats they are likely to receive from extended family members, clan leaders and wider society. Christian converts risk losing inheritance rights or the right to marry – and they are not allowed to marry Christians, as the law still considers them Muslim. Islamic extremists remain active in Iraq, attacking and kidnapping Christians. The government also discriminates against Christians in various contexts, from the workplace to checkpoints.

This is the context in which local faith actors rooted in the historic Christian churches of Iraq have been – and are – able to play a significant role in meeting the needs of local communities, regardless of the beneficiaries’ own religious affiliation.

In fragile, post-conflict settings, it is all too easy for aid to foster corruption. Faith affiliation and values can help an organisation to adhere to humanitarian principles.

In Iraq specifically, religious affiliation may help to protect an organisation that is active in the community from political pressures. A Christian identity can also help solidify community ties, as the organisation is identified with the historic presence of the church over generations.

A member of staff at one local faith actor put it this way, “The church is very near to people – they know people’s needs, of all types – they are with the people. The church is not just a religious institution, it’s also a social institution.”



A group of women in Bashiqua, Iraq, who organise activities at their church for approximately 150 other women



**“Today we are asking for your help. We may forget about the people who persecuted us, but we will not forget about the people who stood with us”**

FR DANIEL, IRAQ

### **Father Daniel, Iraq**

“When I was seven my friend wasn’t allowed to play with me anymore because his parents found out I was a Christian. On my 16th birthday my family had to flee Baghdad overnight because extremists threatened to kill us for our faith.

“In 2014 the persecution got very visible when IS displaced thousands of Christians from the Nineveh Plain. After the liberation in 2016, Christians slowly started to return, but they had to renovate and rebuild many of their houses and churches that IS had destroyed.

“Because of the persecution, many Christians left Iraq. When I was ordained as a priest in 2012, my congregation had 130 families. Nowadays we have 30 families left. Overall, more than 40 per cent of Iraqi Christians have left the country over the last ten years.

“Today we are in big need because we are still facing a lot of pressure from the Muslim majority. Today we are asking for your help. We may forget about the people who persecuted us, but we will not forget about the people who stood with us.

“It’s hard to practise your faith in your own way when you are judged by society. So many Christians feel like Iraq is vomiting them out, they are being persecuted and feel forced to leave. For the first time I feel like Christianity may evaporate from Iraq.”



Faraydoun is one of many displaced Iraqi believers whom Open Doors has helped with microloans to start new businesses

Humanitarian Nineveh Relief Organisation (HNRO) began as a health clinic to serve displaced people fleeing ISIS-controlled regions of northern Iraq. A priest from the affected area came across a woman seeking medical help for her child and was able to identify a doctor who could help from among the displaced people.

**“Local faith actors should be invited to participate in humanitarian coordination and development assistance discussions”**

This initial connection led to the identification of more volunteer doctors. This in turn drew a large number of requests for medical care from other families in the ad hoc camp. A tent was erected, out of which a clinic operated. This soon grew into a charity with two established medical clinics. Even though it was founded by a priest, Fr Behnam Benoka, and operates as a charitable extension of the church, HNRO’s mandate has always been to serve the needy and vulnerable without discrimination.

Their approach indicates one of the great advantages of the local faith actor in offering aid. A community stakeholder said, “They see people’s needs and respond to them. They have a holistic picture of what all the different groups in the region need. Then they do projects for the community to develop them – this can include infrastructure projects like improving community gardens and streets – this develops and builds up the region as a whole.”

A member of staff explained, “What we do well is identify needs – even before people say what they need we see it, and so we can address those needs quickly. This is our capacity. Our ability is to know. The church is the barometer of the community, and we get advice from the church.”

In Iraq, as in so many other places, Covid-19 has highlighted the additional vulnerabilities of religious minorities. It has also clearly indicated the role that local faith actors can play in meeting local needs.

Last year many Open Doors supporters wrote to their MPs urging them to press the issue of ensuring UK aid reached those most in need regardless

of religious identity, and ensuring there was no discrimination in its distribution. Local faith actors can help achieve this if the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is willing to engage with the realities about how this can best be done.

It will mean considering the development of simplified systems for small grants, or funding multi-year small grants schemes to be managed by NGO partners. These will allow local partners to implement small and specific interventions in their communities.

Local faith actors should be invited to participate in humanitarian coordination and development assistance discussions. They should be granted the space to indicate the value of considering spiritual well being as an element of psychosocial and community development interventions.

Faraydoun once owned a profitable factory in Baghdad. When Muslim extremists destroyed his

factory and threatened his family, they fled for their lives. They settled in northern Iraq.

Years later, ISIS violence meant Faraydoun's family had to flee again. "ISIS left us with nothing, no relatives, no houses – they took everything."

They ended up in Turkey, as refugees. Faraydoun had gone from being a successful businessman to an outsider who could not speak the language and was unable to find work.

He was eventually able to return home when the crisis was over, but discovered that their house was in disarray and they were left with nothing. Faraydoun used a microloan from Open Doors to develop a fish farm with his loan. It has now been operating well for several years. The income means his family can survive.

# Countries of concern

## TURKEY (25)

President Erdoğan is in the process of overturning Turkey's long tradition of secular government, pursuing a much more openly populist, Islamist and nationalist agenda.

The reclaiming of the former Orthodox Christian cathedral Hagia Sophia as a mosque in July 2020 was a very clear statement of intent. It was followed a month later by another UNESCO World Heritage site, the former church at Chora, being turned from a museum to a mosque.

But it is the increasing atmosphere of hate speech and violence that has seen Turkey rise eleven places on the World Watch List. Erdoğan used a speech in October 2019, when acting as host to the 3rd African Muslim Religious Leaders Summit in Istanbul, to criticise missionaries for converting African Muslims, saying they were acting 'under the protection of the Western powers'.

The strong religious nationalism in society puts a lot of pressure on Christians – it is widely believed that a true Turk must be a Sunni Muslim. Christians from Muslim backgrounds often hide their faith. If they are discovered, they will face pressure from their families. Leaving Islam is seen as a betrayal of their Turkish identity and a source of shame to the family. They may be threatened with divorce and the loss of inheritance rights.

### “An increasing atmosphere of hate speech and violence”

Turkish influence spreads beyond its borders, most notably in its backing of Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia over the largely Christian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. During that conflict, Armenians and Chaldean Christians in Ankara were beaten, while others in Istanbul were threatened by right-wing mobs.

In northern Iraq, Turkey continues to attack the

Kurdistan Workers Party, which it considers a terrorist organisation. At least 25 Christian villages have been emptied as a result of such attacks since the beginning of 2020.

In 2020, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria said, “The Turkey-backed Syrian National Army may have committed war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture and rape.” And it called on Turkey to halt violations committed by armed groups under its control, including killings, kidnappings, unlawful transfers, seizure of properties and forcible evictions.

## INDIA (10)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is now in his second term, his populist support rooted in Hindu nationalism. The message, 'To be Indian, you must be Hindu', prompts regular harassment and attacks on Christians as well as Muslims.

A clear correlation has been shown between the proposal and implementation of anti-conversion laws and the prevalence of violence against minorities. Eight states currently have such laws. In July 2020 the Chief Minister of Haryana state announced the introduction of an anti-conversion law. He affirmed that there had been reports of forced conversions in the state and that a 'freedom of religion law' would ensure that anyone involved in 'unlawful conversions' would be brought to justice. The new law would 'protect against religious conversion by force, inducement or marriages solemnised for the sole purpose of adopting a new religion'.

The alleged purpose of these laws is to prohibit conversions by force, fraud or inducement. But in practice, civilians and law enforcement officers often misuse the laws and use them to restrict the religious freedom of individuals from minority religions, especially Christians and Muslims. Law enforcement officers often arrest or charge minority faith adherents for conducting constitutionally protected religious ceremonies. Across the country, hundreds of individuals languish in prison due

to absence of evidence of any use of 'force' or 'inducement'. The damage to the individuals charged, their families and communities is permanent, and social disharmony between religious groups has grown under these false claims.

In Haryana, police stopped a Christian prayer meeting after local Hindu nationalists complained that those praying were forcibly converting people. The police arrested the lead pastor and five other participants. Ultimately, they were released for lack of evidence, but only after they had endured detention and ridicule. No action was taken against those who had made the false accusation.

It is increasingly clear that women and girls from minority religions are especially vulnerable to gender-based persecution. A combination of societal factors, governmental inaction, even encouragement and police collusion, results in significant levels of female-specific FoRB violations. Perpetrators seek low-risk strategies that produce maximum damage and can be carried out with impunity. The abuse of Christians is not gender-blind, nor is it ignorant of social class.

### **BANGLADESH (31)**

Bangladesh has risen to (31) from (38). There has been much coverage of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in Cox's Bazar. Amongst them are some

2,000 Muslim converts to Christianity. After a mob attack in January, apparently by violent Islamists, two men are still missing, while a 14-year-old girl, also abducted, was reportedly forced to marry a militant.

### **Ethnicity does not define religion**

The world sees it as the Rohingya Muslim refugee crisis – but not every Rohingya is a Muslim. Those who are Christians face a double vulnerability – persecuted for their ethnicity and their faith.

Last year a group of Rohingya Christians in a UNHCR transit camp in Bangladesh were attacked by a violent mob. They destroyed their homes and their house-church building, and looted their belongings, leaving them with only the clothes they were wearing that day. Some of the believers were so badly beaten they had to be hospitalised.

Christians among the largely Muslim Uyghurs in China could tell a similar story. Christians and Muslims are being persecuted together, but Christians can be treated harshly both by fellow-Uyghurs who feel betrayed by their conversion, and by the police. The authorities are especially concerned about small groups attempting to meet separately from their fellow-countrymen.



Not every Rohingya is a Muslim. Those who are Christians face a double vulnerability – persecuted for their ethnicity and their faith

# The challenge for the UK government

Open Doors recognises that there have been significant and positive developments at Westminster in respect of international freedom of religion or belief in recent years.

A year ago, the Prime Minister indicated his personal concern in his Christmas message. He appointed Rehman Chishti MP as his special envoy on the issue. He was tasked with encouraging the implementation of the Bishop of Truro's Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians. And he set about his task with enormous enthusiasm and energy. We are encouraged that Fiona Bruce MP has been appointed to this role; she is a committed and formidable campaigner for those facing persecution, and we look forward to working with her during this coming year.

**“We welcome the repeated ministerial assertion that Freedom of Religion or Belief is a major priority for the UK government”**

We are encouraged that so many parliamentarians make the effort to attend the annual launch of this report. The APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief – of which Open Doors is a stakeholder – has more members than ever.

Many of them persevere with the parliamentary routines of asking questions, tabling Early Day Motions and attending the increasing number of debates that highlight this issue.

And when those questions are asked, we welcome the repeated ministerial assertion that Freedom of Religion or Belief is a major priority for the UK government.

We are grateful for the Parliamentarians who are demonstrating their concern about this issue, and welcome the Bishop of Truro's leadership in setting up the UK FoRB Forum which is establishing itself as an effective and united voice. We are also encouraged that many countries have committed

to the International Religious Freedom Alliance. In the light of all this we urge the UK government to stay true to its commitments over FoRB. There are so many opportunities – and a pressing, increasing demand – to build on the progress that has already been made. This is a moment to press in and champion the cause of Christians and others persecuted for their faith.

We know that Parliamentarians who care about this issue will be pressing the case, urging the FCDO to implement the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's report and to maintain the recent project support related to FoRB. We urge you to ensure further progress.

In 2020 Open Doors supporters encouraged their MPs to seek assurances from DfID that UK aid, particularly relating to Covid-19, was avoiding discrimination in delivery by local and national partners. And assurances were made that national offices had been given that instruction.

It was less clear, however, that there were robust mechanisms in place to monitor the reality on the ground and ensure that the instruction had been fully observed. It would be desperately disappointing if Christians were the last in line to receive UK aid.

This is why Open Doors continues to press the case that local faith actors should be taken seriously as partners in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable – not because they expect or demand any favouritism, but because they can be demonstrably effective at meeting the needs of the whole community.

The recent initiative to launch the Declaration of Humanity does indeed recognise the key role of faith leaders in the context of the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI). This is a positive response to issues that Open Doors has raised in the past. It is another step forward, and offers significant opportunities for progress.



Open Doors partners provided more than 283,000 persecuted Christians in Asia with vital Covid-19 relief aid in 2020

The new year is full of new challenges. 2021 has dawned on a world devastated by the pandemic, on a nation taking its first steps into a post-Brexit reality, and on a new US President.

**“Local faith actors should be taken seriously as partners in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable”**

The UK government will undoubtedly have important trade deals to negotiate. We urge those involved to stay true to the Foreign Secretary’s stated intent to ensure that concerns about human rights and freedom of religion or belief are discussed as part of these. Two large markets in India and China will inevitably form part of these negotiations and, as this report shows, the right to freedom of religion or belief is seriously compromised in both countries.

The principles of freedom of religion or belief

must reach beyond party politics or systems of government. They are founded on the innate dignity of every human being made in the image of God.

As a Christian agency established to support Christians facing persecution, we are committed to encouraging the UK government to pursue policies that defend Christians from discrimination and violence. By promoting freedom of religion or belief, not least the freedom to convert from one faith to another, we believe that the best conditions are created in which many other freedoms can flourish – to the benefit of all, whether religious or not.

We commend the UK government, indeed all Parliamentarians, for the significant progress on FoRB in recent years. But persecution of Christians is increasing: there is more that can – and should – be done.

# Women and girls – the vulnerable among the vulnerable

Religious persecution is not gender neutral. Christian women and girls are doubly vulnerable to persecution. Women are targeted because of their gender and because of their faith. And because persecution is tailored to target people at their most vulnerable, this has a disproportionate impact on women and girls.

Gender-specific persecution is widely used to repress the Christian community because it blends in, is of low risk to the perpetrators and is highly effective. Persecution against women and girls is hidden, complex and violent.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief has written, "Discrimination based on stereotypical roles of men and women... can assume cruel forms and deprives many women and girls of their rights to life, freedom and respect for human dignity."

In Asia, Christian women are trafficked as 'brides' because of the existing socio-economic vulnerabilities of communities; in the Arabian Peninsula, households quietly exploit Christian maids; in sub-Saharan Africa, raiding militias regularly attack women in Christian villages or abduct them for a life of sexual slavery.

A report published last year by The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) stated, "The evidence gathered suggests that across contexts and religions, there is a pattern of girls and women being targeted for sexual grooming, not only out of sexual predation, but a wider political project to hurt the religious minority and create a religiously homogenous society."

In 2019, Open Doors launched the *See. Change.* campaign, which seeks to recognise the double vulnerability of persecuted Christian women, and call for action. More than 16,000 Open Doors supporters joined upwards of 250 Christian women from across

Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America who have been persecuted for both their faith and gender. They gave their support by writing, painting, drawing or embroidering their names on a square of fabric to create the handmade petition. This was exhibited in Westminster Abbey during November 2019.



The handmade petition, signed by more than 16,000 people, was exhibited in the Chapter House, Westminster Abbey

Exactly one year on, the UK government Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) team launched the 'Declaration of Humanity'. UK government minister Lord Ahmad, the Prime Minister's Special Representative on PSVI, said, "I affirm our unwavering commitment of promoting freedom of religion or belief for all and for preventing sexual violence. It is a tragic truth that women and

Last October, 13-year-old Pakistani Christian girl Arzoo Raja was kidnapped and subjected to forced conversion and forced marriage. Later the courts ordered she should be moved to a shelter. Her husband, a Muslim man in his 40s who lived in the house opposite Arzoo, was arrested.

It was just one of a number of heavily-publicised cases tragically illustrating the vulnerability of young girls belonging to religious minorities.

girls from religious minorities often suffer. Why? Because of their gender, or indeed their faith. This must end... With your support, and our collective efforts, I believe we can make a difference.”

The Declaration of Humanity calls religious leaders of all faiths to use their platform to speak out for women from religious minorities who have experienced sexual violence.

They are asked to do this by challenging twisted ideology that leads to religious extremist groups perpetrating such crimes, and by influencing their communities to support victims and not stigmatise them.

The Declaration condemns conflict-related sexual violence, redefines the understanding of rape

and sexual violence, and affirms the innocence of survivors and the need to fully honour and accept them. It also puts action to words and commits signatories to doing everything in our power to both prevent conflict-related sexual violence and support the survivors.

The Declaration of Humanity will help ensure women who experience sexual violence in conflict, and for their faith, are heard, respected and advocated for.

Open Doors welcomes this significant initiative. It urges the FCDO to ensure it is widely promoted and built on in future – for the sake of the most vulnerable, those with the least power.



Ruth (name changed to protect her identity) was just 14 when Boko Haram attacked her village in north eastern Nigeria. She was abducted and severely abused in an attempt to convert her to Islam. She was forcibly married to a fighter and fell pregnant with her first child. Eventually, she managed to escape. Ruth has begun to process her trauma through a programme run by Open Doors partners in Nigeria

# Stories of hope

## SUDAN (13)

After more than 30 years of Islamist rule, Sudan outlined wide-reaching reforms, which included scrapping the apostasy law, under which anyone renouncing Islam would be sentenced to death.

Under long-time ruler Omar al-Bashir, ousted in 2019 following massive street protests, Sudan had a long history of persecuting Christians, imprisoning church leaders and closing down churches. Now its new constitution guarantees freedom of religion, omits Sharia as its primary source of law and no longer specifies Islam as its state religion.

Inevitably there is still much resistance to such sweeping change; changing a constitution is easier than changing a cultural mind-set. Islamist clerics took to social media to denounce the proposals. But life for Sudan's six per cent Christians is improving, as shown when a court found eight church leaders innocent of charges that have hung over them for three years.

But there is still a long way to go. While these amendments provide more legal freedom for Sudan's Christians, they will continue to experience pressure from society to give up their faith. That's why Open Doors has called on the international community to invest in programmes that empower minority faith adherents, especially minority faith leaders. This is training them to understand their rights and how they can contribute to the building of the new Sudan.

## SRI LANKA

In a village in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province, a small Christian community has for many years faced strong opposition. The mainly Hindu villagers tried to shut down the church. The police reminded them of the freedom of religion granted by the country's constitution, but the villagers decided to take the matter into their own hands. One Christian was attacked on his way to church, initially by his own cousins, then other villagers joined in. His wife and three other church members went to help him, and they too were beaten.

Seven months later Sri Lanka was put under an island-wide lockdown. Most of the village were left struggling for their daily food. The church, seeing this great need, stepped in to help. With the assistance of Open Doors, they provided dry rations for 100 families through the local government representative in the village. Even the people who had attacked the church members received packs of essential goods and were deeply moved by the gesture.



So the pandemic gave the church an opportunity to respond positively – and attitudes have begun to change. The pastor of the church said, “I see a great renewal within the church. Even the local government representative in the village has changed in his attitude towards the Christian community. We are building better relationships with the people now. Thank you so much for your partnership.”



Last year, Open Doors advocacy responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by first asking our supporters to send letters of encouragement and prayer to their MPs – #WeStandTogether.

After the initial phase of lockdown, we launched the *Last in Line* campaign to highlight the exacerbated discrimination faced by persecuted Christians this year. Nearly 5,000 supporters wrote to their MPs to

ask them to ensure there are effective mechanisms in place on the frontlines of local government aid distribution. Wonderfully, many MPs wrote to the Foreign Office and asked questions in the House of Commons raising this exact issue.

As part of the *Last in Line* campaign, supporters took a picture of themselves with an empty bowl and a cross to show their solidarity with those forced to go without food on account of their faith.

# Open Doors advocacy



Dave Landrum joined Open Doors UK and Ireland as Director of Advocacy and Public Affairs in January 2021.

Open Doors UK and Ireland is part of a global NGO network that has supported and strengthened persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries for more than 60 years. The organisation's UK Advocacy team is well-known at Westminster. It is in regular contact with ministers and civil servants at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and plays an active role as a stakeholder of the All-Party Parliamentary group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The Open Doors Advocacy team is active in three main spheres:

- Internationally: at the United Nations and at the European Union in Brussels and Strasbourg
- Nationally: in a number of key capitals, including London, Paris, Berlin and Washington DC
- Locally: at the grassroots, Open Doors provides legal support and human rights training for persecuted Christians. It has increasing numbers of advocacy field staff who provide an important link between the realities on the ground and the national and international advocacy teams

As an NGO working with some of the most vulnerable communities around the world, Open Doors connects

its field experience, on-the-ground intelligence and needs-assessment expertise with its advocacy work in the UK parliament. This is to ensure Open Doors can speak up for those most in need and can communicate growing and emerging trends to decision-makers. We have just begun to establish advocacy reps – volunteers who can represent Open Doors to their MP at a local constituency level.

The annual World Watch List plays an important role in Open Doors advocacy, highlighting countries of special concern and key emerging trends. For instance, through its work with local partners and churches in more than 60 countries, Open Doors was able to identify the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women through research into the gender-dynamics of persecution. This has influenced changes in the field practices of Open Doors, which in turn has driven global advocacy on the specific vulnerability of women from religious minorities.

**> If you are a member of parliament or a civil servant, or work for an NGO, and would like further information on what you have read, or require a briefing of any kind on the worldwide persecution of Christians, please contact Open Doors UK and Ireland's Advocacy team by emailing [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)**

**You can also see the recommendations for action on p.31**

# Methodology

The annual World Watch List is the product of year-round research conducted by Open Doors World Watch Research Unit. The Unit analyses both primary and secondary data to ensure a rigorous and nuanced understanding of the persecution of Christians worldwide, and to rank the 50 countries where it was most dangerous to live as a Christian in 2020. The reporting period for World Watch List 2021 was 1 October 2019 – 30 September 2020.

The World Watch Research Unit works closely with researchers in the field to collect survey data. This is designed to tease out the state of religious freedom for Christians in five areas of life: private, family, community, national, and within the church. These five areas comprise the squeeze (non-violent) element of persecution – the daily pressure of official discrimination, hostile attitudes and family rejection.

Separately, the team measures violence against Christians. This is the smash (violent) element of persecution, one that often commands headlines but which thankfully is rarely the dominant reality for Christians who live in World Watch List countries.

For each country surveyed, scores for the six categories are combined to create a total out of a possible hundred. Those scores determine the country's ranking on the World Watch List. Only verified accounts of persecution are analysed, with many incidents in countries such as North Korea, Libya and Myanmar going unrecorded due to the difficulty in verifying reports in these places. It is therefore likely that the research findings underestimate the real figures. However, Open Doors has consistently chosen to under-report rather than over-report in order to ensure the highest levels of credibility and reliability.

Following primary research, the survey data is analysed against secondary data. Researchers scour academic, NGO and news reports to ensure the survey data is as rigorous and reliable as possible. Further to this, academics and other external experts with specialist knowledge on the countries surveyed are asked to comment and input into the findings. The research methods for arriving at country scores and comparisons have also been independently audited by the International Institute for Religious Freedom.

This three-pronged approach ensures the experience of the persecuted church is carefully triangulated with academic, expert and media analysis, leading to well-rounded, nuanced and accurate research findings.

For a significant proportion of the reporting period Covid-19 restrictions necessitated adaptations in on-ground data collection. With additional digital tools and experts' research, Open Doors is confident that the 2021 scoring and analysis maintains its quality and reliability.

The definition of persecution used in World Watch List analysis is, "Any hostility experienced as a result of one's identity as a Christian. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians." This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalisation, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

# Recommendations

## We urge the UK government to act on the findings of this research to:

- Ensure that mechanisms are in place to ensure that Christians – and other religious minorities – in need of UK aid are not denied access to it because of their faith
- Develop and implement strategies which recognise the interaction of gender, violence, poverty and religion to protect women and girls belonging to religious minorities
- Build and use the capacity of local faith actors as a valuable resource in relief and development

## We urge the UK government to protect, support and build on the positive advances of the past year by:

- Ensuring that reorganisation and budget cuts within the new Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) are not allowed to undermine the advances of the past year, but that the integration of the two departments is used as a positive opportunity to strengthen work on FoRB across the FCDO
- Fully resourcing and integrating the role of the Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief into the work of the FCDO
- Implementing the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's report, but with the recognition that they are the first steps to making a difference for Christians facing persecution, not an end in themselves. The review due next year should be resourced and thorough
- Taking every opportunity presented by post-

Brexit trade negotiations with countries on the World Watch List to champion human rights, in particular the right to FoRB

- Recognising the foundational role of FoRB as a basis for other human rights and civil liberties, and therefore championing its promotion and protection as both a measurement and enabler of democracy

## We urge MPs and peers to take active steps in support of Christians facing persecution by:

- Using oral and written questions to encourage the government to maintain its commitment to FoRB and ensure that promises and pledges are turned into effective action
- Joining the All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief
- Using social media accounts to highlight issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief and persecution of Christians
- Signing the Declaration of Humanity (by emailing [psvi@fcdo.gov.uk](mailto:psvi@fcdo.gov.uk))

**> If you would like to find out how you can get involved with the campaign to combat the extreme persecution of Christians worldwide, contact [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)**

# THE 2021 OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST TOP 50



- |               |                |                |                                 |               |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| ① North Korea | ⑪ Iraq         | ⑳ Uzbekistan   | ⑳ Bangladesh                    | ④① Kazakhstan |
| ② Afghanistan | ⑫ Syria        | ⑳ Laos         | ④② Burkina Faso                 | ④② Cameroon   |
| ③ Somalia     | ⑬ Sudan        | ⑳ Turkmenistan | ④③ Tajikistan                   | ④③ Bhutan     |
| ④ Libya       | ⑭ Saudi Arabia | ⑳ Algeria      | ④④ Nepal                        | ④④ Oman       |
| ⑤ Pakistan    | ⑮ Maldives     | ⑳ Turkey       | ④⑤ Central African Republic     | ④⑤ Mozambique |
| ⑥ Eritrea     | ⑯ Egypt        | ⑳ Tunisia      | ④⑥ Ethiopia                     | ④⑥ Malaysia   |
| ⑦ Yemen       | ⑰ China        | ⑳ Morocco      | ④⑦ Mexico                       | ④⑦ Indonesia  |
| ⑧ Iran        | ⑱ Myanmar      | ⑳ Mali         | ④⑧ Jordan                       | ④⑧ Kuwait     |
| ⑨ Nigeria     | ⑲ Vietnam      | ⑳ Qatar        | ④⑨ Brunei                       | ④⑨ Kenya      |
| ⑩ India       | ⑳ Mauritania   | ⑳ Colombia     | ④⑩ Democratic Republic of Congo | ④⑩ Comoros    |

● EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

● VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION



## Open Doors

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