

**WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE**

# HERE'S HOPE



that God is still at work through His Church  
*(even in this messed up world).*



## **30 Inspiring Stories**

that will lift your  
spirit and reveal  
*behind-the-  
scenes* work of  
the connected  
global Church

# HERE'S HOPE



## **Thank you**

...for requesting a copy of this special edition e-book.

As the largest global network of evangelicals, we have a broad perspective on God at work around the world and we thought you would be so encouraged by these stories of hope and the reminder that even in these challenging times – He reigns.

## **How to Read This E-Book**

Don't feel compelled to read from front to back. Flip through and identify a few countries that interest you most – start by reading them.

Pause at the end of each story to think about what you read. Give thanks for how God is working through His church. Give thanks for how He's working in your life.

Read the scripture verse and prayer at the end of each chapter - for your sisters and brothers in that country.

Learn more about the WEA by visiting [www.worlddea.org](http://www.worlddea.org).  
Questions? Email [development@worlddea.org](mailto:development@worlddea.org)

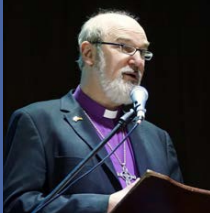
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*Adapted From an Insider's Guide to  
Praying for the World by Brian C. Stiller*

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# “ONE OF CHRISTIANITY'S BEST KEPT SECRETS”



**BP DR. THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER**

*Secretary-General, World Evangelical Alliance*

*That's what I hear from so many Christians when I tell them about the World Evangelical Alliance. Maybe you've never heard of or know much about WEA either. If you consider yourself part of the global Evangelical Church, you'll want to know more because the work we do matters.*

**W**EA is a global network formed in 1846 and now comprised of 143+ national church alliances in as many countries who represent more than 600 million Evangelical Christians. For us, *Evangelicals* are all members of churches of our member National Evangelical Alliances, from 16th century Lutherans and Anabaptists to 20th century Pentecostals and 21st century Independents.

WEA serves as a credible voice for true evangelical faith and people to governments, world leaders and media.

In an era increasingly hostile to Christianity, we advocate strongly for those persecuted for their faith, robbed of religious freedom, or

suffering from other human rights abuses.

We protect sound evangelical theology and offer church leadership training.

We foster communication, understanding and collaboration between the diverse groups within the global Evangelical Church. This brings much-needed peace and reconciliation, more efficient solutions to addressing poverty, natural and man-made disasters, and creation care.

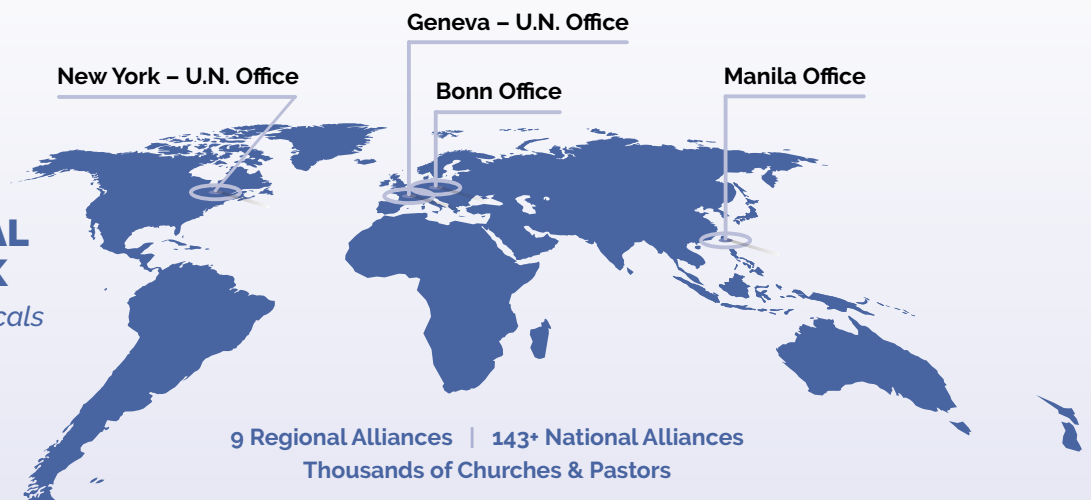
WEA's unifying effect on the global Evangelical Church advances effective sharing and demonstration of the Gospel to help reach more people for Christ. Our call to the global Evangelical Church to pray for breakthroughs on challenging issues and for the good of all brothers and sisters has proven itself to make a difference time and time again.

The unique and extensive work of the WEA is made possible by the generosity of individuals and foundations who share a global perspective on the health and effectiveness of the global Evangelical Church.

For more information: [www.worlddea.org](http://www.worlddea.org)

## **WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE NETWORK**

*Serving 600+ Million Evangelicals*



# TRAVEL THE GLOBE WITH ME



**BRIAN C. STILLER**

*Global Ambassador, World Evangelical Alliance*

*Over the past decade, while visiting many countries on behalf of the World Evangelical Alliance, I've observed churches and ministries at work and prayed personally with those whose hearts are linked to the Father. I have come to see more clearly and been so blessed by the pervasive Kingdom of our Lord, in places and in ways I had never imagined or anticipated, that I decided to share this with others.*

I have captured my experiences from 30 of those country visits. As your eyes and ears, I listen to and observe the work of the gospel as it upends societies, transforms people, and calls the most unlikely into service. In seeing and listening, our hearts are then turned to our Father, and in our conversation of prayer, we intercede on behalf of peoples, nations, ministries, and vocations, doing what the Lord himself asked us to do: "Pray to the Lord of the harvest."

I suggest that you read a chapter a day over one month and pray for each country. I hope that you too will find your spirit launched into new worlds full of enthusiastic Christian

believers who will give you an internal connection to Kingdom life as it is taking place far away.

Each chapter focuses on one country. But as we pray for the world, certain peoples, missions, and needs surface that fit within our global praying. I encourage you not to rush. Feel the texture of ideas, listen to the heartbeats of those whom God is using, and observe the societal struggles of so many different countries. The Lord wants and indeed invites us to bring our requests to him, so let's ask boldly. Let's put our needs before him with what older Bible translations call "importunity," meaning "insistent solicitation and entreaty."

My prayer is that as you read this book you would cultivate stronger habits of praying for countries other than our own and for brothers and sisters we have never met. I also encourage you to consider financially supporting the one-of-a-kind ministry of the World Evangelical Alliance as their impact on the global work of the Evangelical Church has a multiplying affect that yields an even greater return on your ministry investment.

For more information: [www.worlddea.org](http://www.worlddea.org)

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# 01 SOMALIA

## SOMETIMES ONE NEEDS A WARLORD

Somalia has gone through tragic periods of devastating wars and terror. Today, lawlessness grips the country. Piracy on the high seas extorts huge sums. Al-Shabab, a militant group affiliated with Al Qaeda, exercises considerable control in central and south Somalia.

Drought hit hard in 2011 and famine followed. Drought is an ecological disaster, but famine is a politically induced disaster. Christian aid groups were forced out and exploited by Al-Shabab.

The Africa Union Army controls much of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu. Yet Somalia continues as an unruled land, even as the world community attempts to help them establish a working government.



**Location:** an African country bordering the Indian Ocean, northeast of Kenya and southeast of Ethiopia

**Population:** 10 million

**Religion:** Muslim 99%

### DISPATCH

I really should not have traveled to Somalia, a war-torn country run by pirates and warring tribes. I had been appointed as Global Ambassador for the World Evangelical Alliance at the same time as a massive famine broke out in northeast Africa, affecting up to 11 million people.

In this country driven by harsh religion (93 percent of its girls are circumcised) and its with family clans at war with each other, women and children are frequently left on their own in refugee camps, where they fight for food and search for places to lay down. The walls of their shacks are thin, hardly able to keep out the blowing sand. When their children pick up dysentery or a contagious infection or disease, these mothers plead for help.

I had gone to east Africa, encouraged by a promise that I would be flown by a relief agency to the camps. When I arrived, my travel plans fell through. In Nairobi, I was briefed on the violence in the Mogadishu area and the

vast numbers fleeing violence, drought, and famine. The morning news reported that Al-Shabab, a terrorist group that controlled much of Somalia, had been pushed out of Mogadishu. We decided to try to visit the city. Aiah Foday-Khabenje, then secretary general of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa, and I got visas along with troubling warnings. We still set out into a country that was out of control.

### MOGADISHU

After I had arrived in Mogadishu and was waiting in the terminal to get through immigration, a French photojournalist asked why I was there. I fumbled with an answer. Then he asked who was looking after us. I replied we had not figured that out yet. In rough language he said, "You're an idiot. I work in dangerous places, but this is the most dangerous city in the world. Don't leave the airport."

Finally, after interrogation, an immigration officer said we couldn't leave the terminal without protection. Shortly thereafter, we



were introduced to Amir. As we walked out of the terminal, a parked truck with five soldiers holding AK-47 guns awaited us. Here was 24-hour protection. Amir, a warlord with his own 100-man army, owned a highly secured hotel in the center of the city.

He escorted us to his souped-up truck. We drove streets lined with bombed-out buildings and shattered marketplaces—devastation in all directions—and worked our way through a



*Somalian woman and her child walking through a market.*

maze of cement roadblocks into the backyard of his hotel.

Soon we were heading to a camp on the edge of the city, where I saw women arriving with children. They were loaded with all they could carry. With no men in sight, the women scrounged to find a small patch of ground where they could assemble a hut, built with anything they could find. Thousands upon thousands of these huts dotted the camps.

Walking through one camp, I saw a woman crying, her head covered, sobbing into her hands. Our aide-de-camp, in hushed tones, said, "Sir, she has lost two children, and an hour ago she lost her third."

"From what?" I asked.

"Hunger."

Later in the afternoon, back at the hotel,

we wandered out to an open area protected by walls and steel gates. Men were sitting around playing cards, chatting and waiting. It was Ramadan, and no food could be eaten until sundown. Many senior government officials and ministers lived in the hotel, where they were safe. It was also close to their parliament building. My warlord friend introduced me to several officials.

"This is Brian, the crazy Canadian."

"Why are you here?" a cabinet minister asked, looking up from his card game. "I thought Canadians were cowards. . . . You only come to Kenya, not Mogadishu. You are the first Canadian I've seen in years. Thank you for coming. But why are you here?" It was time to tell him the real reason.

"I'm a Christian, and while I know you have a terrible reputation worldwide for pirates and killings, I'm here to tell you that God loves Somalia and he loves Somalians."

I've preached many sermons about God's love, but in that moment a breeze seemed to blow through the courtyard. Men of different faiths and cultures, we were connected by a few simple words. The atmosphere changed. We were now brothers.

When we entered the airport for our flight back to Nairobi, I noticed a young Somali working the metal detector and wearing a T-shirt with the English statement: "This is True." I asked him if he knew what his shirt read. In clear English, he responded, "Yes, I do know." I pushed him further and asked about the "John 3:16" reference printed on the shirt. Not only did he quote the verse, he briefly shared his testimony. Here, in the face of unrelenting Christian opposition, this young man was not fazed by his vulnerability. His faith was strong and public.

As we waited for our return flight, the immigration officer who had originally arranged our security came to say goodbye. I found myself wrapped in his muscular arms not once but three times. What our broken verbal languages didn't communicate, body language made up for. On my writing pad, he wrote his

name and phone number, asking me to contact him on my next visit.

Somalia is a country of such enormous needs that one almost wonders where to begin to pray. What never ceases to surprise me is that in the darkest of places, the Spirit is at work. Countries plagued by oppression, war, brutality, or famine, while seemingly hopeless to us, do not turn away the face of our Lord. God's economy relies on our faithfulness. Investment of prayer activates the Spirit to be in places where we can't go.

### **TODAY'S READING**

*Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other...The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest. Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.*  
—Psalm 85:10–13

### **ITEMS FOR PRAYER**

- For women and children caught between hostilities, and their need to survive
- For Christian aid organizations, that they will be given safe and open opportunity to minister to Somalians, bringing medical,

educational, nutritional, and spiritual life

- For strength among its very few Christians, that they will be protected with wisdom, grace, and courage in their service
- For Somalis attempting to rebuild a functioning government
- And for many Somalis living in other countries, still dealing with the horrors and hurts of their past

### **PRAYER**

*Father, in this country of Somalia, where sorrow and tragedy seem the lot of so many, I pray that there will be rain for harvest, peace to bring an end to the unceasing inter-clan warfare, and opportunity for the development of a stable government. Regardless of religion, these are people whom you love and for whose lives you gave yours. Raise up young men and women who will learn of this love and with joy give witness to others of their faith, even as this young man in the airport was willing to give his witness. Bring your special blessing to Somalia. Amen.*



# UKRAINE

## WHICH ROAD AHEAD?

A vital center of Slavic culture, the people of Ukraine have lived for centuries under varying outside intruders: Lithuania, Poland, the Ottoman Empire (Turkey), Austria-Hungary and Russia. For much of the 20th century, until 1991, it was within the Soviet Union.



**Location:** Ukraine is bordered by Russia to the east. Other neighbors are Belarus, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, the Black Sea and Sea of Azov.

**Population:** 45 million (which includes Crimea); 78 percent are Ukrainian, 17 percent are Russian

**Religion:** Christian 80% (Orthodox 61%, Catholic 10%, Evangelical/Protestant 7%); Nonreligious 20%  
Official language: Ukrainian

### DISPATCH

February 24, 2022 changed more than the physical landscape in Ukraine.\* As Russian President Putin's army advanced, it set the world on edge, with one country invading its neighbor. Just weeks earlier, I had been in Ukraine, and I could find no one who thought Russia would invade, despite the ongoing war in the Donbass region since 2014. I was told numerous times of the family and community relationship between the two countries, and that a war of invasion was simply unthinkable. People continued to move about, living their lives, even with the warning of a possible attack. This after all was their country, one that had participated for centuries in an historic intermingling of Slavic peoples in Eastern Europe.

Decades after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukrainians believed it meant they were set free to become their own land, people, and country. Yet now they could hear the drumbeats of the attempted revival of an empire. Russia took Crimea and started a proxy war in the Donbass in 2014 and then, on February 24, 2022, sent in its armies with the stated intent of taking over Ukraine and subjecting it to the Russian Federation.

Ukraine's road to independence has been

long and rough. They have a long history, as Kyiv was founded in the 5th century and in 988 its population accepted Christianity. In the 20th century, under Stalin, 7 million Ukrainians died in the Holodomor (the Great Famine) of the early 1930s; nearly 700,000 senior Ukrainian leaders were purged during occupation, and finally, after years of living under strict control, in 1991 Ukraine declared its independence.

Ukraine is very religious. One almost needs a lexicon to follow their religious tribes and links. There are two Ukrainian Orthodox churches. The larger one has recognized the Moscow Patriarchate as their head (although during the 2022 war, an increased number of these churches switched their loyalty to the Kiev Patriarchate). Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) has become part of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, an independent denomination. In 2017, the Patriarch of Istanbul gave the Orthodox Church of Ukraine its autonomy, which meant the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was no longer subject to the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. There is also the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church with 3,646 churches. Estimates put evangelicals at about 12,500 churches.

## WARS

On the day when the 2022 war began, Ruslan Maliuta, a Ukrainian who had worked with the WEA on long-term planning, sent me a note asking how we could help. The same day, I was notified that some Canadian businesspeople wanted to send money but were concerned to ensure that it would aid Ukrainian refugees. I contacted our global leadership, and within one day a fund was set up and a team was selected to make decisions on allocation of funds. Within a few months, we processed 1.5 million \$US to help refugees in Ukraine and the millions fleeing to surrounding countries.

We chose to work primarily through churches, as we believed they would be closest to those who needed assistance and could apply funds to their immediate needs—at first, mostly accommodation, transportation, medicines, and food. There was no handbook, no one in charge, and no central organization to which one could go for direction. People acted instinctively, doing what they could to help. Some had experience serving people who were displaced during the Donbass war in 2014-2015. The issues were varied. For example, Romania is known for sex trafficking activity, and as women and children fled to that border, men were there to exploit them. So church leaders sent vans of people to the borders, to warn and protect women and to ensure that they were in the hands of trustworthy people. In Poland, a country that opened its arms wide to refugees, a church in Krakow was offered hotels to accommodate refugees. Within hours, the pastor had set up an organization to care for a thousand refugees.

On the front edge of war were children traumatized by killing, violence and, above all, fear. Scrambling with their parents, often left at the border by a father who was not allowed to leave the country, not only had the children lost their home and friends but now their father too. This was not lost on church leaders, who engaged special services to help children work their way through the trauma and fear that gripped them.

Months after the war began, we met in Lviv with 24 church leaders—12 from Ukraine and 12 from surrounding countries—to review what was needed and what we might do. Here was our conclusion:

It's important for us to clearly understand the many challenges we face and to devise effective methods in our response and support. The continuing war makes plain the ongoing need for evacuation and the dispensing of aid



*Monument at Entrance to  
Holodomor Center*

to people in dangerous places. Our profound commitment to biblical values enables us to discern the following challenges as the most important ones:

- Spiritual and psychological support and humanitarian assistance to those suffering from the war and to those caught in economic hardship, particularly internally displaced persons and refugees.
- Rehabilitation programs for parents, children, youth, and veterans.

- Support and rehabilitation for pastors affected by the war.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

What does a Christian do when conflict stirs anger and hatred against your neighbor in a border country? There are deep and profound challenges ahead, as Ukrainians, disillusioned by the betrayal of their neighbor, now face a future in which they as Christians will have to deal not only with their crushing memory of this war, but with those – of the same Christian faith – who bought into the Kremlin narrative instead of seeing and appreciating the actual destruction and killing that was taking place. Bonding in fellowship and love will test the call of Christ, not only to love everyone but specifically our enemies.

Then, what will come of the political and military conflicts in Ukraine? We know from history that Christian communities, even those of considerable strength, can be strangled. Among the constraining opinions and national distress, I tried to distill from its Christian leaders what might guide us in support and prayer for Ukraine.

Over the past 30 years, the Evangelical church there has not only grown in numbers of congregations but has become more engaged in caring for the social needs of its people. When the war began, there were instinctive reactions as to how to respond to the crisis, born out of a new vision for kingdom life and witness. While always keeping in mind the preeminent need for spiritual well-being and a clear witness to Christ and his way of salvation, church leaders understood that the gospel also speaks into the needs and conflicts of life. They saw an opportunity for practical, caring engagement in response to the massive dislocation and local and national distress caused by war.

Through the furtive years of Soviet surveillance, evangelicals were forced to live in obscurity. Yet they developed a core of leaders, and today this new generation is taking the lead. They are resolute. The war, though

all-consuming, has not distracted them from their task of caring for their people. They are determined and outward-looking, seeking ways to affirm their nation and people without allowing nationalism to define their faith.

Ukraine, with its brilliant culture and landscape dotted by domes and crosses, is a reminder of its historical and ubiquitous Christian witness. Today it is going through another period of political agony.

I asked a student, "In this time of crisis, what do you want me to tell the world?" His response: "Yes, we are experiencing pain, fear and hope. These are all big. As Christians, we don't support violence or fascism. We want Ukraine to be a nation where Christ is alive and helping people."

Keep these leaders in your prayers that good will emerge from this moment of stress.

**\*As I write this dispatch, Russia is in full war mode in Ukraine.**

## TODAY'S READING

*Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

—Psalm 30:4–5

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Many Christians know what it is like to suffer for their faith. Yet in the past years, Christians in Ukraine have experienced the joy of public witness. Pray that in the conflict, they will gain freedom to design their own future.
- Division among God's people can be destructive. Pray for a strong move of the Spirit to break down dividing walls, keeping people from allowing old and new hatreds to erode the nation and embitter its people.
- There are strong churches and ministries. Pray for pastors as they lead their people in Christ-centered faith, guiding them to love their world.
- Increasingly, there has been a move among some evangelicals to engage in public-

square leadership. Pray for these men and women, that their leadership and witness will give honor and praise to the Christ we love and serve and be the presence of our Lord in the places where they serve.

## **PRAYER**

*Dear Savior, you understand so well the hurt and sorrow of war. Bring into the Ukraine community your loving peace and presence. We pray for those who lead churches, at a time which their people are overrun with calamity and conflicting narratives. May they voice your challenging words of unity for your church. Help them live out your calling and mandate. We know that calamity comes by way of war. Spirit of God, raise up a people to offset that which breaks down and destroys. Instead, may there be a resolute commitment to be your people who learn to sing a new song of Jehovah, even in the midst of national dislocation and stress. We believe this can and will come, and in your name, we ask and give thanks. Amen.*



# 03 SOUTH AFRICA

## PRAYER AND NATION BUILDING

South Africa became infamous for imposing apartheid in the 20th century, a political and legal means of keeping distance between the races.

Christianized by both the Dutch and British, its legacy of apartheid created in Africa a nation with both a Christian witness and a violent set of laws. Nelson Mandela, famous for his African National Congress (ANC) leadership and later imprisonment, became the means whereby laws were repealed and democratic free elections held. He was elected in 1994 and died in 2013.



**Location:** Southern region of Africa, on the Indian and Atlantic oceans, bordered by Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Swaziland

**Population:** 53 million—80% of black ancestry

**Religion:** Christian 75% (Evangelical/Protestant 45%, Catholic 6%, Anglican 3%); Muslim 2%; Hindu 1%

### DISPATCH

I stood in the prison cell where Nelson Mandela spent eighteen of his twenty-seven imprisoned years. Although it looks like any other cell, it is a hallowed place for many, noteworthy because of the man it imprisoned. Walking around Robben Island, just off the South African coast near Cape Town, I imagined Mandela's feelings in his many conversations with colleagues in the African National Congress (ANC): a sense of futility mingled with hope.

The transition away from white minority power is a story like no other. A political system called apartheid evolved through the early years of the 20th century and came to full bloom in the 1960s. As South African laws became more repressive and absurd, Mandela led an underground resistance and was eventually convicted by the white courts, as were many of his ANC associates. As the resistance grew to rebellion, the government finally realized the laws needed changing, and they eventually consulted Mandela while he was in prison.

They promised he would be released and that general elections would be held.

In 1990 the world watched and wondered as Mandela left prison and boarded a ferry to Cape Town. His peaceful presence, his measured words, his respect for his captors, and his carefully considered convictions showed that he was a leader of a different stripe. His mature wisdom and gracious manner suggested how he might someday govern.

This is the story we all saw. But behind it is another story less reported. After decades of harsh rule under apartheid, the oppressed majority could have easily pursued retribution. And yet their antagonisms were focused primarily on their own people, as the black community was divided. Mandela led the ANC, while Mangosuthu Buthelezi, chief of the large Zulu tribe in South Africa, led the Independence Freedom Party (IFP). The two sides were at each other's throats, with killings on a regular basis.

South Africa was ruled by people steeped in doctrines of the Dutch Reformed Church mixed

with their own need to survive as a minority. There were similarities to early settlers in the United States who perpetuated the practice of slavery while defending it biblically. But there were other spiritual influences in South Africa, including Andrew Murray, a minister who died in 1917 but left a rich heritage of Christian thinking in his more than two hundred books. He is still read and appreciated around the world for his writings on prayer.



Caesar Molibatsi and Moss Ntlha

## FEAR OF BLOODSHED

Christian leaders in South Africa saw conflict likely to happen, so they mobilized in prayer for a peaceful resolution. At the same time, the leaders of the ANC and the IFP knew violence had to stop, so they invited Henry Kissinger from the United States and Lord Peter Carrington from Britain to assist in mediation. Adding to the unrest was Buthelezi's threat to forbid Zulus to vote in the coming election. This meant that when Mandela was elected—a foregone conclusion—Buthelezi could then declare that the election was illegitimate, since a major tribe didn't participate in the vote. This would, in effect, make Mandela a president without a mandate. This accusation could rally the troops to further conflict at the very time

the white laws of apartheid were crumbling. What was seen as a wonderful transition was turning into a nightmare.

Michael Cassidy, South African leader of African Enterprise, saw the futility of high-level mediation without relying on God's intervention. He reached out to Washington Okumu, a Christian professor from Kenya called "the gentle giant," to join in negotiations.

On April 14, 1994, thirteen days before the election, Kissinger and Carrington boarded planes and headed home, with Kissinger predicting a million people would die in what he saw as a coming civil war.

## TIME TO PRAY

Michael Cassidy went into action and rented a stadium in Durban and started prayer meetings all over South Africa. While prayer meetings were going on, Washington Okumu worked all night with the IFP to find a way to avoid the conflict. With an agreement in hand, he sped to the airport in Johannesburg to get Chief Buthelezi's endorsement but arrived too late. Buthelezi's plane had already left. But a few minutes into the flight, his pilot said they had an instrument problem and had to return to Johannesburg, and Okumu got his meeting with Buthelezi.

On April 17, twenty-five thousand people turned out for prayer at the Durban stadium, matched by smaller prayer groups around the country. In the VIP lounge, Okumu and Buthelezi had final discussions on a settlement with President de Klerk, hammering out a plan while thousands were praying for a peaceful settlement.

Ten days later, elections were held. The chief allowed his Zulu people to vote. Mandela was elected and not one person died from tribal conflict. The Durban Daily News, under the headline "How God Stepped In to Save South Africa," quoted Chief Buthelezi: "It was [as] though God had prevented me from leaving [Johannesburg], and I was there like Jonah, brought back....My forced return was a godsend."



The convergence of leadership, skill, and a will to pray brought change to a nation racked by decades of cruelty. Into that world, at a time of enormous potential for good, came a threat so severe that the country could have been torn apart. Michael Cassidy provided Christian leadership. Washington Okumu, a scholar and of Christian faith, lent his considerable skill in negotiating. Thousands upon thousands reached out in prayer for their nation, believing that the Spirit would intervene in ways no one could predict. And God had his man, Nelson Mandela, to lead the people through the coming days.

### TODAY'S READING

*Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. . . . Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasure at your right hand.*  
—Psalm 16:5, 9–11

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- The effects of evil laws are not easily nor quickly erased. Pray for the well-being of this

nation, for its Christian witness, as believers turn to love justice and do mercy.

- South Africa is vital to all of Africa—politically, economically, and spiritually. Pray for its leadership in all arenas, that the witness of Christ will powerfully fill the land and inspire a rising generation to put its trust in the risen Lord.
- Issues continue to reverberate across its land: racial conflict, the scourge of HIV/AIDS, violence, unemployment, a wide gap between the rich and poor. Pray for a national revival of hope and peace so that they will find new ways of living together in this marvelous country of great human skills, beautiful vistas, and natural resources.

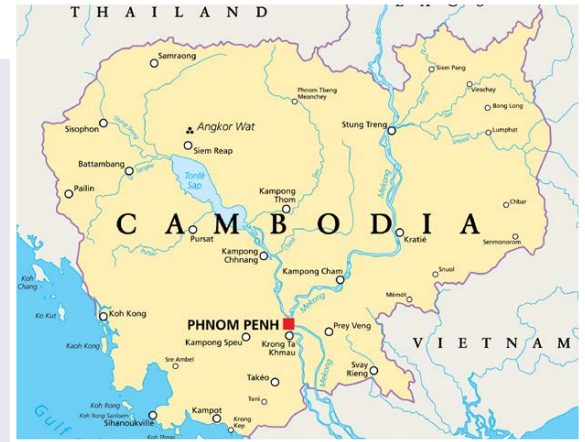
### PRAYER

*Gracious Lord, king of life and ruler of all people, we lift South Africa in prayer, a people and land of remarkable beauty and energy, yet a land laden with failures and hurts. You, our God, our transforming presence, can bring new life—your new birth—to its people. May this be a breadbasket of spiritual and economic blessings served across the continent of Africa. This prayer we give because you are the only one to whom we can turn. Amen.*

# 04 CAMBODIA

## SURVIVING THE KILLING FIELDS

“The killing fields” of Cambodia ring as foreboding as “the ovens” of Auschwitz. In 1975, Pol Pot (name derived from “political potential”), with his Khmer Rouge, carried out genocide, killing more than 2 million Cambodians. The educated and the city dwellers were “re-educated,” forced into the countryside to work as manual laborers. Pol Pot was ousted by Vietnam, and the United Nations governed from 1992–1993. In 1997 a coup gave power to Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Cambodian People’s Party.



**Location:** Southeast Asia bordered by Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and the Gulf of Thailand

**Population:** 14.8 million

**Religion:** Buddhist 95%, Christian 3%

### DISPATCH

We drove two hours north of the Cambodian city of Siem Reap. The first hour was uneventful, but then it was back roads, mud holes, and wandering cattle. Sokreaksa Himm (“Reaksa”) pointed out the field where his family of seven had spent their first night in 1975. The newly rising Communist party was deconstructing society—“re-educating” anyone with an education or position, and gang-marching them out of cities to work on farms—and Reaksa’s family had been targeted because his father was a teacher.

We reached Kokpreach, the village where Reaksa’s family was forced into manual labor. He pointed out the school he had built recently from profits of his first book, *The Tears of My Soul*. We drove slowly down the only road, watched by curious eyes looking out from houses built on stilts to escape monsoon floods.

It was here that Reaksa at age thirteen had watched villagers hack to death his father and brothers and later his mother. He escaped by lying under dead bodies in a pit where the killers had dumped their victims. After everyone had left, he fled to the jungle and lived alone until he was taken in by a village family.

Years later he reached a refugee camp

across the border in Thailand. From there he was sent to Canada, where World Vision cared for him and their staff led him to faith in Christ. He then studied at Tyndale University, preparing for ministry. It was there that we first met.

### AFTER THE RAIN

Plaguing his young mind were not only memories of how his family was killed, but also forgiveness, an idea he learned in his newly found Christian faith. His early journey of survival was now into its next phase. In his second book, *After the Heavy Rain*, he explains:

I could tell that something was wrong with me, and underneath the façade I suddenly realized that I needed to forgive totally. Forgiveness is not easy, but if I allowed the big ball of fire to keep burning inside my heart, my life would not be worth living...When I could not forgive, I was actually burying myself into the grave of bitterness, anger and hatred.

Determined, Reaksa returned to Kokpreach and found the man who had killed his father and mother. As a symbol of forgiveness, Reaksa tied a Cambodian scarf around the man’s neck as well as his own. Then he gave him a Cambodian Bible and read from Luke 23:34—“Father, forgive

them for they know not what they do."

We drove to the end of the village, turned around, parked, and walked to a house where a woman was sitting. A man in his early sixties came over to us and smiled. "These are my adopted parents," Reaksa told me. After his family had been slaughtered, this family offered him protection and a home.

Because I had heard other Cambodian Christian leaders describe their survival of the killing fields, I wanted to see the place where Reaksa's life had turned into a nightmare. I also wanted to understand how faith enables a



■ Reaksa Himm

boy to become a man. For Reaksa, it had been crucial to shed the guilt for having survived and yet deal with his anger toward his family's killers.

How does one forgive? This was put under a microscope back in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, as I sat with pastors and learned that two of them had been soldiers in the Khmer Rouge army. Here, years later, they were forgiven by their colleagues, some of whom had lost family in the massacres. Further, these men, who had been part of Pol Pot's killing machine, had learned to accept forgiveness.

Monsoons are an annual event in Cambodia, and the rice fields depend on them. One follows the other, and as Reaksa notes in *After the Heavy Rain*, grace gives courage and strength to move from terrible moments of fear and killing into new ways of seeing oneself and others.

## TODAY'S READING

*He has broken my strength in midcourse; he has shortened my days. "O my God," I say, "do not take*

*me away at the midpoint of my life, you whose years endure throughout all generations." Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing, and they pass away; but you are the same, and your years have no end. The children of your servants shall live secure; their offspring shall be established in your presence.*

—Psalm 102:23–28

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Many of today's pastors in Cambodia were children during the genocide. Out of their loss and sorrow, they've learned to forgive. Pray for their continuing capacity to offer to their people transforming grace and freedom in Christ.
- While there is official religious freedom, pastors face pressures in raising up a young church. Pray for the younger leaders in their pastoral and leadership roles.
- Corruption continues to pervade the culture. Pray for the church in its witness. Mission Kampuchea 2021 is a vision by national leaders to plant churches in all of their cities and towns.

## PRAYER

*Father of love and care, this blood-soaked land of Cambodia, made so by evil men, needs the gentle and forgiving life of your Son. May those burdened by living through those terrible years feel the lifting of the memories and come to know your undergirding strength for their lives. We praise you for the life and witness of Reaksa and others who survived to tell the story of your love to their own people. In this country where your name is so unknown, we pray for this initiative of Mission Kampuchea to plant churches throughout the land, places where the story of your love will be made known and where people will be nurtured in the life-giving message of your coming. Amen.*

# 05 SRI LANKA

## PEARL OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

Sri Lanka, home to many ethnic groups, religions, and languages, consists primarily of two major peoples: the Sinhalese, also called Sinhala (76%), and the Tamil. Each group has its own language. The Sinhalese tend to be Buddhist, and the Tamil are mostly Hindu. Buddhism is the national religion.

Often referred to as the pearl of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka (formerly called Ceylon) is politically organized as a republic with a presidential system. Colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, it became independent in 1948. Civil war raged between the two groups from 1983 to 2009.



**Location:** An island off the south coast of India

**Population:** 21 million

**Religion:** Buddhist 70%; Hindu 13%; Christian 9%.

### DISPATCH

Sri Lanka, a garden-of-Eden country, is a teardrop-shaped island just a few miles off the south coast of India and is celebrated for its tea. Its Buddhist government is unsympathetic to those of Evangelical/Protestant faith and condones persecution of religious minorities.

It is one of two countries (the other being Myanmar/Burma) where the calming influence of the Dalai Lama, the Buddhist leader from Tibet, is absent. Instead, the land is ruled by religious fundamentalism.

In today's devotional prayer we will see Sri Lanka through four windows.

### LEADERSHIP

My visits to Sri Lanka began in 1978 when I spoke at a Youth for Christ staff conference, alongside longtime friend Ajith Fernando. Known by some as the John Stott of Asia, Ajith is a pastor, leader, and theologian who models indigenous leadership. Sri Lanka is a place from which many hundreds of thousands have emigrated in recent years. Ajith and his wife, Nelun, and their family chose to stay. In conversations with him over decades, he

never failed to tell me of his love and burden for his own people. His many talents made him an obvious recruiting target for world organizations and centers of training, but he never lost his focus. For Ajith, practicing theology meant living among his own people, working out the challenge of evangelizing youth, and training staff to serve.

Ajith's many books have been bestsellers. His presentations at Urbana and other international conferences have given him a world stage. Yet he stays and lives among people devastated by war. His witness continues from his writings and speaking, and is made visible through his staff and within the complex ethnic struggles of the Tamil and Sinhalese. Few model servant leadership as does he with theological discipline and skill, and motivation to inspire a new generation of leaders.

### WITNESS

It is not easy to live out one's Christian faith in Sri Lanka, especially as an Evangelical or Protestant. In a recent visit, I was to have been part of the sixtieth anniversary of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka,



but the gathering was postponed because of persecution and harassment. Celebration seemed inappropriate, given the price being paid by pastors and people for their faith.

Evangelicals, lacking sufficient public recognition by the Buddhist government, face all sorts of problems: buying property, accessing permits, obtaining visas, and accessing education for their children in government-sponsored schools.



■ *Ajith and Nelun Fernando*

## PERSECUTION

I had been invited to speak about persecution with Christian leaders in Sri Lanka. *What do I have to say?* I wondered. *I've never been persecuted.* However, the Bible has something to say in the parable of the unjust judge and widow (Luke 18). Luke begins with, "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." He concludes the parable with no sympathy but speaks of his coming: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" In effect, Jesus says, "If this lousy, unjust judge will eventually cave in and give justice to the widow because of her relentless persistence, how much more will your heavenly Father be fair and gracious in his response?"

When suffering unjustly, don't give up. Keep pressing for justice.

## MINISTRY

My wife, Lily, and I drove into the countryside to meet a pastor who faced persecution in planting a church. Reverend Ayesha Jeevika, a graduate of the Assemblies of God College, had seen in a vision the exact location in Colombo, the capital, where she felt led to start a church.

As she did so, Buddhist priests began their harassment. No one would rent a place for Bible studies or worship services, so the church met in the open. When it rained, they used plastic sheets for cover. But intimidation continued. One day, surrounded by men of the village, they were told that if they continued, they would end up in the hospital.

One night it happened. While meeting from late in the evening until early morning, studying and praying, a gang broke in. They took four women, including the pastor, and beat them and attempted to rape them. Finally, the women were forced to kneel and were pressed to shout, "My lord is Buddha." Pastor Jeevika refused. They beat her so badly that she was hospitalized for weeks. After some time, charges were brought against the assailants, and villagers were required to pay a fine of 100,000 rupees, about US \$800.

The church eventually bought land for a building. But one night, villagers tore down the concrete pillars and leveled the partially constructed church. So they began on another piece of property and completed a place of worship. Their church is often stoned, windows are broken, and Christians are intimidated. When they seek protection, the police are reluctant to provide any help.

Ayesha's children aren't allowed to attend public school, and even private schools in the area won't register them, so they drive 45 kilometers to attend a school outside of their area.

These friends in Colombo know much more than we do about the cost of serving Christ.

Our offerings are simple in contrast to their faithfulness and courage. We believe that their humility in service is core to their powerful witness.

On Easter 2018, 359 were killed, hundreds more wounded, and churches and hotels shattered as Islamist suicide bombers launched their Easter Day slaughter in Sri Lanka. Pastor Thiruhumarm of the Evangelical Zion church in Batticaba, a city on the eastern coast, saw a young man approaching the church on Easter Sunday morning. "I asked him to sit down and [then I] stepped outside the building. Moments later the bomb exploded," the pastor said. In the Zion Church, 29 died, including the pastor's son.

As we absorb the sorrow and outright horror of Sri Lanka, we realize that this kind of destruction is not isolated, nor will it easily or quietly go away. The rawness of this human anguish is so discomfiting that we might be reluctant to see this in both a global and local context. For while this tragedy is rooted in its politics, we all live in villages that are not isolated from the world. We might be inclined to think globally but inevitably we must see locally.

## TODAY'S READING

*In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, "Grant me justice against my adversary." For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, "Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming." And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"*

—Luke 18:2–8

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- The United Nations has called strongly for religious freedom in Sri Lanka. Pray for a political solution so that people of all faiths will not be overrun by religious nationalism but will have the opportunity to worship in security and with freedom.
- Youth for Christ has had unusual impact among the youth of both ethnic communities. Pray for its leadership and funding, and for creative and bold initiatives to open the hearts and minds of young people to the life of Jesus.
- Postwar stress continues, with Christians from both communities attempting to bring reconciliation and hope. Pray for those working for peace where religious domination intimidates.
- Pastoral training continues to be a pressing need—preparing a younger generation to lead the church in witness of the Gospel to society, especially in public engagement. Pray for these young men and women as they prepare themselves to lead in the coming years.

## PRAYER

*Father, we know you grieve over harsh and brutal war which kills and destroys many. Within the lingering hatred and unresolved issues in Sri Lanka, we pray for the witness of your people to the wider society. May there be boldness in the lives and ministry of Christians, showing that in Christ there is meaning and true peace. For young men and women seeking to instill hope and understanding, may they too know your wisdom and abiding peace in all they do. Finally, we pray that government leaders will respond to requests for fair policies. May they provide protection and freedom, allowing Sri Lankans to worship as they choose. Amen.*



# 06 ALBANIA

## WHEN BLOOD IS THE ONLY SOLUTION

Albania was as closed to the gospel as a country could be. A Communist government took over the country in 1944, and under Enver Hoxha it became infamous for denying religious freedom and imposing a severe ban on any expression, information, or texts of faith. After the Soviet empire fell, Albania removed its anti-faith policies, allowing an increased expression of faith.

**Location:** In southeastern Europe, with the Adriatic Sea to the west and Ionian Sea to the south; bordered by Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Greece



**Population:** 3 million

**Religion:** Muslim 62%;  
Christian 30%

### DISPATCH

In the 1990s, the Balkan wars brought notoriety to Albania and the surrounding region, but for many, its land and borders are still confusing. Often it takes traveling through a country before its geography comes into focus and conflicting issues begin to make sense.

Albania, tucked into southeast Europe just across the Adriatic from Italy and strung along a mountainous coastline, is unknown and unremarkable to most except for its post-WWII declaration to be atheistic. Brutal and demanding, it was more than Communist in economic and social policy. Dictator Enver Hoxha prided himself on following Stalin, but he went further, declaring that anything religious would be outlawed. Churches, mosques, and synagogues were demolished or turned into everything from barns to factories, making neighboring Communist dictator Josef Tito of Yugoslavia seem like a saint. Few countries, notably North Korea, were in Albania's league of total religious exclusion.

A vacuum of moral ideology held this historic community of people suspended between the absolute control of its president and a heartfelt desire to believe.



| Elona Proji

### ELONA AND THE KANUN

I sat with Elona Proji, a widow, in downtown Tirana's Stephen Café, run by Christian entrepreneurs, and listened to a story for which I had no warning. It was blood-chilling and bizarre, yet magisterial in its biblical vision. Albania was occupied by the Turkish Ottoman Empire from 1385 to 1912, and its Muslim

dominance chased Christians from urban areas into the mountains. This was especially true in the north around the city of Shkodra, just south of Montenegro.

Families fleeing the Turks over time coalesced into tribes around family names and identity. An ancient set of oral laws, dating from the fifteenth century but probably having evolved from the Bronze Age, was codified in the 1800s in a written form called the Kanun. These laws covered all aspects of life and applied to both Christians and Muslims. During the Communist reign, the Kanun was abolished, but in the 1990s, ironically with the fall of Enver Hoxha, people distrusted the police, especially in the north of Albania, and reestablished the Kanun as their rule.

Embedded in these ancient tribal laws are rules regarding blood revenge: how a family deals with the murder of one of its members. As ancient as Cain and Abel, if a member of your family was killed, then it was your duty to ensure that a person of the offending family was also killed. That obligation would continue for four generations until the offense was repaid. Blood revenge is, in its essence, payment for crimes once done.

It was into one of those families that Elona wed. Coming from the south where such a practice was unknown, her life was soon to be trapped by the ancient custom of feuding. The family of her husband, who was pastor of an evangelical church, was caught in a blood feud in Shkodra. One of his uncles had killed a young man, and now twenty-four families were seen as linked to that uncle.

The men of each family feared for their lives, and thus they wouldn't leave their homes, not for work or for anything else, unless they were camouflaged or hidden in the trunk of a car. Financially strapped, the wives would have to earn the family income while the males often descended into alcoholism. Domestic abuse typically soon followed.

### **FLEEING FOR SAFETY**

Elona's husband, Dritan, never left their house for four years, so she took up the role of

pastor of their congregation. Finally, they fled to England, but after two years Dritan said he no longer would hide from the sin of his community. He would return, pastor the church, and trust God for his safety.

For eighteen months he openly cared for his congregation, even inviting the offended family (as the Kanun custom allowed) to meet and to try to find a means of reconciliation other than bloodletting. However, they refused to meet, and he knew that his life was in danger, even though the Kanun forbids killing a priest.

One day as he was leaving church, seven bullets struck him and he died. Elona was asked by a television reporter for her response. "I forgive," she said. Then, when asked if she was going to press charges, she said, "Forgiveness doesn't allow for that."

While the impact on family and church was enormous, what was surprising was the freedom triggered by Dritan's death. The husbands and fathers of the twenty-four families under the blood curse were no longer captives within their homes. The offended family had exacted its price.

Such literal giving of life for the freedom of others is not what most of us think of when we consider Christ's call to discipleship. As the blood of sheep lifted the curse of sin for the wandering Israelites, pointing forward to the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, freeing us into eternity, so Dritan knew his death would lift the curse from his extended family. He was willing to pay the price. Elona, meanwhile, continues to pastor the congregation while completing a PhD in psychology.

### **TODAY'S READING**

*Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*

—Psalm 16:5–8

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Praise for the impact of many who have had a part in giving witness of Christ after the doors of Albania were opened. Their stories of effective outreach provide evidence of God at work.
- Pray for the leadership of the Albania Evangelical Alliance as they seek to bring churches, fellowships, and agencies together in a spirit of unity and witness.
- Pastors and Christian leaders live under the stress of gaining sufficient support to care for their families, all while serving as pastors and leaders in their missions and churches. They so need our support and prayers.
- Pray for training missions and schools providing teaching for the people of God.

## PRAYER

*Father, we can see how your Spirit was at work in Albania, even during the dark years of repression when public worship was excised from the country. Today, while there are a growing number of churches, we pray for villages and towns where there is no witness, and for ethnic minorities who don't even have the Bible in their own tongue. We give thanks for those who are faithful in ministry. Lord, make us willing to give our lives for the freedom and belief of others. And on behalf of hundreds of thousands of Albanians living in nearby Kosovo and other countries, we ask for a strong witness of faith among them, that they would be strong and convincing in their testimony of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

# 07 MEXICO

## NOT WHAT I EXPECTED ON THE INSIDE

In today's devotional, while we focus on Mexico, we look specifically at a world we most often forget: prisons and their inmates. Worldwide there are 25 million people in various kinds of prisons, some rough and crowded and some modestly comfortable.

Once inside a prison in most of the majority world, you feel the constraint of too many people in too small a space. It doesn't take long to see that the system has one driving interest: to extract a penalty, thus a penal institution. Dignity is stripped away and identity is replaced with a number. Hope is a rare commodity. Drugs cloud feelings, a coping mechanism, to just get through the day. If one thinks ahead to the day of release, it seems so far away that surviving the day at hand becomes paramount. A little help from friends is always welcome.

In such places of desperation the Spirit is alive and well. The most surprising of flowers bloom out of cracked walls; fresh water bubbles up from broken cisterns. Caught in timeless constraint, judicial slowness, inability to pay legal costs, internally ruled by drug cartels, both men and women stay alive, and not surprisingly many are converted and determined to live faithfully for Christ.

### DISPATCH

#### Reclusoria Sur Prison, Mexico City

It was one of those days I remember with acuity. I wanted to see life through the eyes of prisoners and observe this ministry, which began following the imprisonment of Richard Nixon's hatchet man, Charles Colson.

Reclusoria Sur Prison holds 10,000 men, where the minimum sentence is fifteen years. Sections of it are run by drug cartels, the underworld power of Mexico linked into drug producing countries to the south. Sleeping space here is often just where you can find it . . . bathrooms and hall floors. We walked among the men without fear, many of them wanting a smile or handshake.

As we made our way through a maze of outdoor corridors, we heard music and singing

into a chapel built by Prison Fellowship (PFI). The clean white building was constructed by inmates and paid for by PFI. Before we went in, I had seen several men trying to persuade the guards to let them into the service, but only those who attended weekly Bible training were allowed in, and this morning for good reason, as I was soon to learn.

We were seated with the 120 inmates garbed in tan, their official color. At the front were twenty-five women in red PFI golf shirts, singing, playing instruments, and leading the men in worship.

I admit to some skepticism: Attractive women ministering to male inmates? Hardly the equation for unfettered spirituality, I thought. Singing progressed and then two women, like a tag team, led in teaching the Lord's Prayer. They



**Location:** To the north is the United States, to the south and west the Pacific Ocean. To the southeast are Guatemala, Belize, and the Caribbean Sea and to the east is the Gulf of Mexico.

**Population:** 113 million

**Religion:** Christian 95% (Roman Catholic 88%, Evangelical/Protestants 10%)



were dynamic and the men sat in attention, listening for almost fifty minutes.

Next was a liturgical mass with the singers continuing to lead in highly spirited songs. While music played, some left their seats for the side where the priest was taking confession. They would kneel, many sobbing in confession.

After mass the men stood up and turned around to face the back of the chapel. There twenty-six volunteers passed out lunch, buns



■ Staff of Prison Fellowship

with a special spicy beef, and drinks followed by a wonderfully rich chocolate cake.

But I wasn't ready for what happened next. The volunteers began passing out bags. As each took his bag, his hand was stamped to show he had received his. It was all carefully orchestrated and I could see them following a learned pattern. When they had received their bags, they would move to another section of the chapel. What I didn't understand was their sense of excitement. When I moved to see what they had been given and the reason for such exuberant joy, I saw that each bag held two rolls of toilet paper and some toiletries. They were like excited teenagers at Christmas and I still couldn't figure out their enormous joy.

I soon learned. In prison, the inmates have to

buy their own toilet paper. Some have no family, no money and no one to visit them and provide either such amenities or money. This was better than Christmas.

I saw volunteers ministering to the men, careful, wise and discreet. Grateful that I had stuffed some tissue in my pocket that morning, I watched this ministry of love and healing—as moving and real a ministry as I've ever seen anywhere. My emotions were on a roller coaster as I saw kingdom life lived out in such pure and unadulterated ways.

Going to those forgotten and deemed unworthy in the name, love and authority of Jesus gave these men what nothing else could. I left prison that day with a new kind of heart.

### TODAY'S READING

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

*Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

*Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'*

*The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

—Matthew 25:31-40

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Ministries such as PFI are crucial in recruiting and training volunteers to become friends of those in prison. Pray for such ministries and for their leaders as they find selfless ways of bringing Jesus into prisons.
- Critical to entry are prison officials. Pray that in places where there is resistance for Christians to enter and minister, the growing credibility and effectiveness of such ministry will open doors for Christ's love.
- Find prisoners you can pray for by name. Learn about their needs. Ask ministries for names of specific people for whom you can pray. Pray as well for their global ministries, so in need of our support.

## PRAYER

*Jesus, you mentioned prisons as specific places for us to visit, for you knew that prisoners are some of the first we forget, stored away by society, out of sight, out of mind. And you want us not to forget. Today set loose in my heart a recording which helps me not to forget those, many of whom are forgotten about over time, even by their families and friends. We lift to you Prison Fellowship and other ministries faithfully making their way through frisking guards, into places most would rather avoid. Bring joy and blessing to those who visit, which they in turn transmit to those who need your love and joy. And please, Lord, help me not to forget. Amen.*



# 08 CHINA

## WHAT IS A "HOUSE CHURCH"?

China is a place of dynamic Christian growth. In the early twentieth century, following years of foreign mission work, the Chinese church became more independent, developing its own leadership. The 1908 Manchurian revival defined the emergence and developments of a uniquely native evangelical tradition. In spite of the wars and revolutions of the 1930s and 1940s, Chinese evangelicals launched a wide range of ministry and mission.

After Mao Tse-tung and his Communist regime took control in 1949, church-state relations became a decisive factor in the life of Protestant churches. During the Cultural Revolution, many congregations became part of "the underground church." Today, the government attempts to monitor the church by way of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and China Christian Council, the official means by which churches are registered. So-called house churches, formerly known as underground churches, are not registered.



**Location:** Asia

**Population:** 1.3 billion

**Religion:** Non-religious 45%; Chinese traditional 28%; Buddhist 12%; Christian 8% (estimates range between 90 and 140 million)

### DISPATCH

The church in China continues to go through ups and downs, with times of relative freedom but also, more recently, increased surveillance and restrictions by its national and local governments.

An essential feature of the church's presence in China is the number of local, often unregistered churches. They are not necessarily underground, however. While visiting one of them, I remarked to an associate, "This sure doesn't look like a house church." The church platform was lit with colored lights, and there were drums, an electronic keyboard and a worship team leading a very young congregation in worship.

This is an important part of an emerging and ever-growing vital force, moving the needle of faith in a country once shaped by the cultural formulations of Confucianism and its traditional religions. Later, in the mid-twentieth century,

much of China's tradition was obliterated by roving bands of young communist thugs during the Cultural Revolution, tearing down any vestige of its ancient religious reminders.

The very name "house church" points to a critical period in which the gospel witness was cut down, plowed under as the government expected it never to be seen again. But something happened. The communists envisioned destruction, but the Spirit had other plans.

### HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN MISSION

Robert Morrison is noted as China's first missionary, then Hudson Taylor from England and his China Inland Mission. Early on, the idea of "three-self" was promoted, emphasizing a national church built on three primary ideas: self-government, self-propagation, self-funding.

### WHAT IT MEANS

Here's where the term "house church" is

confusing. Many have actual locations they rent as a place of worship, often a floor of a commercial building, renovated to suit their needs of congregational life.

### WHAT I SAW

As I visited a number of house churches, here is a brief commentary.

We walked out of the elevator of the eighth floor of a commercial high-rise into a delightful area painted with children's pictures. Introduced to the director and his wife, I learned it was a kind of NGO (real ones aren't allowed there) caring for 180 children with learning disabilities. Real and operating, but also including two house churches, both pastors being women. They told me with smiles, when asked if they were ever harassed, that when they get wind of trouble, they shut down services for a few weeks until the trouble blows over.

In another city, I was directed to the second floor of an office building where a Korean house church meets. Then across the street to another building: "There on the third floor is a house church and on the seventh, a prayer center. Oh yes, on the top floor, a house church for the Taiwanese."

In one city, all house churches had been shut down, in preparation for a meeting of an international economic group. The reason was to avoid disruption. But a year later, I sat with twelve staff and volunteers, going over Bible texts, praying and talking together. After they were shut down, it was only months before they had another place and were operating again.

Later, I was surprised as my host touched the "down" button in the elevator of a high-rise apartment. I felt it bump and the door opened to an underground level for car parking. We maneuvered around cars and basement stuff. In the musty and dark basement, I saw an opened door, and greeting us was a cross. The pastor guided us into his house church, a small room seating 70, chairs in rows facing a small pulpit.

Then, across town, I saw a cross and a sign mounted on a commercial building advertising

a house church. We took an elevator and exited into a 7,000-square-foot house church, with multiple offices and an auditorium seating 600.

In another city, my translator led me to the elevators of a high-rise and punched in floor six. We went up and the door opened into a spacious church, its worship center seating 350, platform lit with floodlights as the worship band prepared for service. Just down the hall were rooms housing their seminary.



Church Staff in Beijing

China continues to change. The enormous and rapid movement of rural population into urban areas is growing house churches beyond what anyone anticipated.

When Jesus said he would build his church, he surely had China in mind.

### TODAY'S READING

*He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*

—Mark 10:14–16

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- While China moves down a road toward increased government control, and as churches face new challenges in faithfulness to the Scriptures and in serving

their people, the Spirit continues to raise up courageous and wise leaders. Pray for them, their learning of biblical truth and their ministering to their communities

- In each country, Christians are called on to live out the Gospel in ways that speak to their people and needs, and in language that makes sense in their world. Pray for those who influence pastors, training them to minister so people in their political and social world will see the joy and wisdom of Christ, and turn their hearts to him.
- Pray that Christians everywhere will be resolute in looking for opportunities to serve in matter of social and public concerns, allowing the truth of the Gospel to do its work of transformation.

## **PRAYER**

*Dear Father, may my heart be touched with the needs of children in China. I pray that the Spirit will raise up mothers and fathers who will take children into their homes, giving loving support so they may grow into maturity and faith. As the church in China grows, may your hand be upon its leaders. Keep them faithful to your Word, loving and at peace among themselves, Christ-led witnesses to their government, community and people. Help us to be as little children to receive the kingdom of God. And may the power of that witness overcome forces that would attempt to intimidate, showing instead the gentle and resilient love that Jesus offers to all. Amen.*

# ETHIOPIA

## A DOOR CLOSSES, A DOOR OPENS

An ancient civilization, Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country and is famous for originating the coffee bean. It has been ruled by a monarchy for most of its history. It is home to some eighty different ethnic groupings. Prior to 1980, there were a number of Ethiopian Jews, known as the Beta Israel; many of them now live in Israel.

In 1930, Haile Selassie became emperor, layering on himself titles such as "King of Kings" and "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah." In 1972, a Soviet-backed Communist force known as the Derg established a one-party state. Half a million people were killed during its purge, with a million dying by famine. In 1991, the ruling force was overturned.



**Location:** Northeastern Africa, in what is called the Horn of Africa. It is bordered by Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, and Eritrea

**Population:** 92 million

**Religion:** 65% Christian (Orthodox 43%, Evangelical 23%); Muslim 34%; Chinese traditional 28%; Buddhist 12%; Christian 8% (estimates range between 90 and 140 million)

### DISPATCH

Traveling the ancient land of Ethiopia, one encounters many tribes and languages, landscapes, and faiths. Ethiopia bridges the Middle East and Asia to the African continent. Mystical, colorful, ancient, a habitat of early human existence, it's a land that has been ruled by both the ruthless and the benevolent.

Ethiopia is the place where the earliest of church plants occurred, Acts 8: Around the year 330, Christianity became Ethiopia's state religion. Citizens embraced faith in a way that did not depend on personal conversion or choice. Until 1974, when Emperor Haile Selassie was forced out of power after thirty-four years, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was the center of national Christian identity, education, and culture. From then until 1991, Marxist socialism ruled. Even during the oppressive Communist rule, an explosion of Christian conversions changed the face of this country. Here, as in other places, a story critical to the advance of the Christian story happened

when the Spirit took a problem and turned it into an opportunity.

### A DOOR CLOSED

A young Ethiopian, Hika, born in 1856, lost his father when just a lad. An Oromo ex-slave from Wellega, he was renamed Onesimus Nesib. Raiding tribesmen stole him from his mother, and after being traded four times, he ended up in Massawa on the Red Sea, at a boys' school run by the Swedish Evangelical Mission. He eventually was converted and expressed his desire to evangelize his Oromo people, the largest tribe in Ethiopia.

In a series of bizarre twists and turns, Nesib studied theology in Sweden and sought to return to Ethiopia, determined to minister to his people. Four times he tried to enter his homeland but was turned back. In one of his periods of uncertainty, he began to translate psalms and write hymns and books in the Oromo language, Oromifa. He translated Christian literature, including John Bunyan's



*Man's Heart and Luther's Catechism.*

It took Nesib thirteen years to complete the first translation of the Bible into Oromifa. For the next seventy-five years, that was the primary Bible used in Ethiopia, and his translation was foundational for the spread of the Gospel throughout the country. Disappointed as he had been by the refused entries, those delays became golden moments. His translation not only made known the Gospel to those who had never heard it, but was essential in building churches for recent converts.

### **THEN A DOOR OPENS**

The Spirit used a freed slave, turned into a fine theologian, to become a founding pioneer of the Ethiopian Evangelical church, called *Mekane Yesus* (Jesus' dwelling place), the country's second-largest denomination. The largest one is the Ethiopian Kale Heywot (Word of Life) Church planted by SIM, an international mission organization.

Too often, Evangelicals think the Christian church began with Martin Luther or the founder of their denomination. It is misleading to see the church only within our own recent or immediate experience. If we concentrate too much on contemporary issues, we will miss the rich history that tells us of how the Spirit has been building the church continuously for two millennia.

Representing forty million Ethiopians, the Orthodox church is directly linked to an early New Testament witness: Philip. Led by the Spirit, he left the revival fires of Samaria to speak to an Ethiopian government treasurer of Queen Candace, who had been attending Passover in Jerusalem. Hearing the Scriptures explained to him by Philip, the official believed and was baptized before returning home to Ethiopia (Acts 8:26–40). In the year 301, the Ethiopian Axumite Empire was the second empire to adopt Christianity as its state religion, after Armenia. This community of faith has stood for Christ and has learned to live peaceably for hundreds of years with their Muslim neighbors.

As often occurs, during the harsh repression of the Communist regime, the gospel found access into the hearts of Ethiopians. The astounding growth of the church in recent years can be attributed to three factors, starting with the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit. After the fall of Communism, people who for the first time experienced the personal work of the Spirit were energized by this newly found knowledge and presence were contagious in expressing their faith. Second, the effect of thirty-five ethnic groups having the Bible in their own language was almost instant. Hearing the Bible in one's own tongue turns words into life-giving music. Finally, healing and exorcisms demonstrated faith beyond words. As one person said, "When a person goes home from a prayer meeting either changed as a person, or healed from a disease, next week their family and friends attend as well. It just can't be stopped."

### **A CROSSROAD**

Geographically, Ethiopia is a crossroad between Middle East and Africa. There is also a remarkable affiliation with the Hebrew ethos mixed with the Christian story. These traditions provide a place where the Islamic message does not have ready access as in other northern Africa countries.

In 2018, a new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, a Pentecostal, was elected. His work resolving the war with Eritrea, a country to the north, led to him being nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. However, in 2020, the Tigray People's Liberation Front attacked a government post, and civil war ensued. Famine, a frequent visitor to the Horn of Africa, (the region in northeast Africa that includes Ehtiopia) only adds to the troubles and challenges of its people.

The Ethiopian church has two major components: the Orthodox and the evangelicals—one ancient, the other recent—both with a sincere interest in finding ways to work together.

I pray that those who call themselves by the Christ of Nazareth will combine their witness to

strengthen the Christian story. And further, I pray that this faith will be dynamic, finding places and means of cooperation so that the ongoing history of the gospel narrative will bring peace and national strength to this place of antiquity and remarkable possibilities.

### TODAY'S READING

*Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns."...Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. . . . He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth.*

—Psalm 96:7–13

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- A country of this size and with centuries of Christian presence can influence others in Africa. Pray for Christian leaders as they advance the gospel into their land and to other peoples and nations.
- With such a large Christian population, both Orthodox and evangelical, pray that the

gospel will influence the work of Ethiopia's public leaders, and that spiritual vitality will characterize its people and land.

- Because it is located like an island in a sea of Islam, pray for a strong witness for Christ, both within Ethiopia and to its neighbors.
- The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has much influence within the country and among its people. Pray for a spiritual renewal among its leaders and people.

### PRAYER

*Gracious Lord and Savior, it was to this land that the earliest of gospel witness came via a senior government official. And to these people you have continued to bring, generation after generation, an ongoing presence of your love and gospel. Out of their heartache from oppression, set aflame the passion of knowing you within all elements of the church. May the transforming story of Jesus be birthed in the lives of ordinary Ethiopians. And Lord, we offer a special prayer that the civil strife will find peaceful settlement and that the different expressions of Christian faith will find a meeting place of unity in you. Lord Jesus, revive the church in Ethiopia. Amen.*

# 10 HAITI

## PEARL OF THE ANTILLES

Haiti is 94% African. The island nation was settled by the French in the early 1700s. Thousands of African slaves were forced to work the sugar cane fields. Eventually, the slaves overthrew their European masters. Today, the country struggles with poverty, corruption, and violence. Much of its social service is delivered by mission agencies, both Catholic and Protestant. The UN has had a strong presence, both in peacekeeping and in reconstruction after earthquakes and storms. Among Haiti's many challenges is a form of modern-day slavery called *restevak*. Some 10% of its children—typically orphans or children from rural areas—are taken in by families yet treated as slaves.

### DISPATCH

I first set foot in Haiti in the 1970s while making films. Today, I find her much the same, yet so different. Tent cities planted after an earthquake in 2010 are almost gone, and yet on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince an unnamed shanty city, housing hundreds of thousands, has grown up—a squatter community with no sanitation, no water, and no schools. Even so, the people's will to remake, reconstruct, and renew is boundless.

One quickly falls in love with Haitians—their noisy “tap-tap” buses and vibrant colors, but not their pothole-riddled roads. Like parts of Africa, so much of this land and its people rise in tragic moments with hope, resolute determination, and faith.

I was drawn to Haiti's younger Christian leaders who are moving this “pearl of the Antilles” from the underwater of its past to the surface, manifesting a spirit to remake this island country.

### EDUCATION AND MEDICINE

The story that matters for our focus in prayer is the determination of churches and Christian missions to make real what Jesus came to do.



**Location:** In the Caribbean, sharing an island with the Dominican Republic

**Population:** 10 million

**Religion:** Christian 95% (Roman Catholic 70%, Evangelical 20%); Ethno-religionist 3%

Out of Haiti's thousands of churches, many have their own schools; 90 percent of schools are run by Christian and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Professionals may complain about the unevenness of standards, but without these church schools, millions of children would grow up with no education at all.

Alongside education are the medical ministries, Christian clinics, and hospitals funded by missions and churches, doing what government cannot. Seventy percent of Haitians have no access to health care. To add to this loss, 30 percent of medical professionals have left for Canada or the United States. In this world of topsy-turvy political maneuvering, the Christian presence in education and health ministries embeds ballast in a ship so vulnerable to cultural and physical storms.

### A LAND OF WIDE GAPS

This Caribbean country displays such extremes, from pervasive poverty to stores with most anything one could want; with a literacy rate of just 55 percent, but with many who are well-educated; from curious and troubling religious practices to the inspirational and rigorous.

Haiti is breathtaking in beauty, yet depressing in squalor. Less than a two-hour flight from south Florida, this country with African roots defies adequate description. To understand Haiti, it must be felt.

Its long history includes a most astonishing military feat. In 1803, its ragtag army kicked out Napoleon's military, making it the first army of its kind to successfully defeat a colonial power.



| *Alice Van Norman*

Of course, Haiti's recent history of brutal dictatorship—from "Papa" Doc Duvalier to "Baby" Doc—has stigmatized this Caribbean country. Even today, while ruled by an elected government, its ability to operate as a democracy is fragile.

In 2010, a cataclysmic earthquake ripped open its earth, toppling buildings and resulting in the death of a quarter-million people. Then as Haiti was lifting itself up by its bootstraps, two years later cyclone Isaac blew its monstrous wind and deluge of rain, destroying much that had been rebuilt.

Few countries are more religious than Haiti. Christianity arrived in 1630, first by Catholic missionaries and then Protestant missionaries in 1807. Embedded in its heritage is voodoo—a reworked African understanding of the world of spirits of good and evil—which permeates the country. The Roman Catholic Church is criticized for syncretism, the wedding of Christian faith

and voodoo. Meanwhile, a common claim leveled against Evangelical Protestants is that personal salvation is often its only message. Both criticisms can be overplayed but are valid in their premises.

On Sunday morning, Haiti's streets are filled with pretty girls wearing colorful ties in their hair and frilly dresses. Boys looking smart in Sunday clothes, along with their families, are off to church.

## HOPE ONGOING

The vital factor needed by today's church in Haiti is leadership. Bright minds, schooled in academia and the world of experience, aren't looking for prosperity or easy living elsewhere. Nor are they naïve. Their analysis is clear, unapologetic, and unvarnished. They know the odds. They live in a "catastrophic alley," where storms will smash over their world again. Corrupt politicians will rob their citizens blind. The power of voodoo will continue to mislead many. Even so, driven by a call and raised in hope by faith, younger leaders create, build, lead, and comfort—moving forward, doing what good leaders do.

For over thirty years, Ian and Alice Van Norman have been coming to Haiti for up to six months each year, building schools, a hospital, ministry centers, churches, and now helping with a university.

Entrepreneurs in their own land, they have given from their resources and at times had their gifts matched by their business friends. As Lily and I drove the dusty roads and walked the muddy streets with the Van Normans, we watched as they arrived in places of their beneficence. They were greeted with wide smiles, bear hugs, giggles, and faces alive with recognition, as children sought to hold their hands. We stood by, teary-eyed. The Van Normans have brought much more than money to Haiti. They have given years of their lives to people they have come to love.

Troubles continue to haunt the land: major earthquakes, presidential resignations,



continuing economic and social stress. However, if you plan on a visit to Haiti, don't let your life go by without seeing firsthand the life and energy of Christian faith in this land of wide gaps. For holding the disparities together is the One who is before all things and in whom all things hold together. That's what the apostle Paul said about Jesus in his letter to the Colossian church. It's still true.

### TODAY'S READING

*Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the Lord is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.*

—Psalm 84:10–11

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- There is danger that one will become fatigued in praying for a country with seemingly continuing disasters and unresolvable issues. Let us be faithful in our prayers for Haiti, specifically for those who provide education for children, that their efforts would bring transformation to this coming generation.
- For the many who are working in difficult

conditions, providing medical care and comfort.

- For pastors and Christian leaders who are called on to help those wanting to find release from the prevailing presence of voodoo.
- For the missions and NGOs who deeply care about the many needs and are giving their lives in service.

### PRAYER

*Dear Jesus, you who gave of your own life so we might live today, I pray for many in Haiti who struggle for the basics of life, and for children so wanting to attend school. I pray for pastors and churches throughout the land. May those at Haiti's hospitals and clinics be enabled by good staff and supporting funds. Lord, we are so grateful for the Van Normans and their gift of love and development. May others take up their challenge to give of themselves, too. Here, in this land, where joy and hardship live side by side, may your people, empowered by your presence, be bold in trusting you, honest in their commerce, and faithful in their worship, so this country will rise in strength and witness to you, Lord, whom so many love and wish to serve. Amen.*

# INDIA

## COMPLEX AND MYSTERIOUS

India is the second most populous country in the world, after China. India's population is varied and complex: 22 official languages, 456 languages, and 2,500 distinct people groups. Its constitution provides for religious freedom, but the rise of Hindu nationalism concerns both Christians and Muslims.

Christians make up 7% of the population. Many come from the most vulnerable sections of society, the Dalits and tribals, and mission movements are doing outreach among the higher castes. India is one of the earliest countries to receive the gospel. Thomas, a disciple, is reported to have come to Kerala in southwest India around the turn of the first century.



**Location:** South Asia, framed on three sides by the Indian Ocean

**Population:** 1.3 billion

**Religion:** Hindu 74%; Muslim 14%; Christian 7%; Sikh 2%; Buddhist 1%

### DISPATCH

India is a place of endless surprises—a tapestry finely woven over millennia, with wealth and poverty lying cheek to cheek. Drive down one street, and before you are prosperous high-tech firms, while just a short distance from wealth is the entrenched culture of poverty—people scavenging for their existence. In all its finery and tragedy, India is a land where the life and witness of Christ is pushing back in a way one would have thought impossible.

Complicated by a 5,000-year history, plagued by its many Hindu gods, colonized by Germans, Portuguese, and British, this country of more than a billion people is complex beyond a lifetime of study.

### THE CASTE SYSTEM

India's caste structure defines the person, his or her role, and where he or she can (and cannot) move. It is a religious vision of life that gives high privilege to only 5 percent; 25 percent receive favorable status, and the balance of 70 percent are relegated to OBC (Other Backward Classes). Then there are the Dalits (the untouchables, or outcasts), who are part of no caste at all.

It works in this way. Society is seen as a person. The "head" is the Brahmin caste (5 percent)—priests and academics who serve as the mouth of the body, providing spiritual well-being. Only men who are born into this caste can become priests. According to the Hindu idea of Karma, a person continues to die and be born again until possibly he or she reaches this upper state. When a Brahmin dies, he has no further need to advance. He is like a spark returning to the fire.

Beneath the head are the "arms," the warrior caste called Kshatriya (12 percent) who rule and protect society. Then comes the "thighs," the Vaishya caste (12 percent), merchants and landowners who oversee commerce and agriculture. Finally, there are the "feet," the lowest caste or the Sudra (25 percent). These are peasants, farmers, and unskilled workers, those who do manual labor for the top three classes.

The untouchables or Dalits aren't included, as they aren't considered a class, not included in the image of the person, as are the Brahmin, Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Sudra. Making up half of the society (including tribal groups), they are considered non-persons. Higher castes

refuse to touch what they have, to eat with them, or to have any association with them. Although the government has passed a non-discriminatory law, this age-old system is well entrenched. Untouchable means exactly that: you don't touch them or allow them to touch you.

With 700 million classified as servants or untouchables, the caste system hinders people's mobility to move outside the determined social



General Secretary Evangelical Fellowship of India, Vijayesh Lal

structures and diminishes their capacity to rethink the very notion of a person.

Dr. Richard Howell, former general secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, put it to me in this way: When two Indians meet as strangers, "the encounter is often dual; everything—response, behavior, body language, social niceties, form of address, receptivity—depends on an assessment of where the person stands on the scale of power and influence." For an Indian, superior and subordinate relationships "have the character of eternal verity and moral imperative—and the automatic reverence for superiors is a nearly universal psycho-social fact." A person's entire worth depends on the position he occupies on a hierarchical scale. In Hinduism, identity is dependent upon worth, and worth is determined as people are born and reborn in accordance with their karmas, the quality of their deeds. This certainly affects human relationships.

The caste system was seriously challenged by the arrival of Christian missions. Schools were opened for Dalits in the 1840s when missionaries

began the slow process of reshaping society so that it would treat untouchables as humans.

Much has changed, but the caste system is alive and well. In the IT sector, people are accepted on the basis of education and skill. But when marrying, families press hard to ensure their children marry into a class no lower than theirs, as property that moves intergenerationally is to be kept within the caste where it originated.

## EVANGELISM WITHIN THE CASTE SYSTEM

So how does the Gospel advance in this caste structure? It seems to do so like wildfire! Movements of faith break out all over. Howell says two things characterize evangelism here. First, *fluidity* – that is, many come to faith without calling themselves Christians. They keep their traditional names, clothes, and customs, and they meet together at something other than what would be thought of as a "church." These groups include the Allah Abad, "the church meeting" – about 10,000 in the Punjab who meet on Sundays on a field. Also, there is the Yesu Darbar, "The Royal Court of Jesus Christ." Another group is the Yesu Satsang or "truth seekers," whom most wouldn't recognize as Christian, yet they trust in Jesus and follow his teachings

Howell's second characteristic of evangelism in India is *spontaneity*. Gospel initiatives often break out in places where there seems to have been no strategy, nor anyone targeting the area for evangelism. These outbreaks of faith have a strikingly familiar pattern, as we also see in the book of Acts, characterized by teaching, healing, and casting out evil spirits.

Persecution is a growing factor in some areas of India. An underlying concern is that the government might shift toward religious fundamentalism and press legal penalties on religions other than Hindus, deny opportunities for employment, or impose heavier taxation. Today in rural areas, churches are burned, pastors beaten, and Christians intimidated. As the gospel presses into new areas, conflicts increase.

Yet there are many reports of an acceleration of Christian witness, increased engagement, and unprecedented outreach. We visited an ashram ministry center outside New Delhi. The director, who had been raised as an orphan, had a heart for lepers, so he persuaded the government to give land where lepers could



■ *Taj Mahal*

build their shanties. Meanwhile, he helped them fill out forms for government subsistence. Since lepers have children, Richard Howell wondered, *Where do they go?* So he built a home and school for them. Then he noticed mentally challenged women abused on the streets, and he built a home for them as well. When I asked about a new hospital nearby, I assumed Howell had done regular treks to North America or Europe for fundraising. No, he didn't even have a passport, he told me, and much of the financial support came from Hindus in the area.

That night I preached in the ashram center's church, and after I had finished, many lined up for prayer, including those asking to be set free from evil spirits. So I did as instructed in the New Testament: I took authority. A pastor later told me, smiling, "Well, Brian, welcome to India."

### **TODAY'S READING**

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In heaven he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is*

*like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes it circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heart.*

—Psalm 19:1–6

### **ITEMS FOR PRAYER**

- Give thanks for the remarkable growth of Christian ministry in India and for the creative means by which the gospel is spread.
- Pray for national leadership, for their integrity and boldness as they seek to plant and grow churches.
- Those coming to faith also need economic well-being. Many agencies are offering micro-financing (small loans) to assist those who otherwise would not be able to do business or to care for their families. Pray for those agencies and those whom they assist.
- Another continuing need is Bible translation for the many who currently don't have the Scriptures in their own language. What a gift for people to read the Bible in their own tongue. Also, pray for those doing translation work.

### **PRAYER**

*Father, India is your world, and those who live there are your creation. Your son, the Lord Jesus, gave his life so they too would know of your gracious love and your daily provisions. Today we especially remember those who are planting churches in the urban and rural centers of India. May their faith be resilient so that their words are alive with your presence and promise. As your gospel continues to move from village to village and city to city, protect your people from those who would intimidate or persecute. And may Bible translations continue to build so people can read your words in their own languages. I offer this prayer because only in your name is there authority. Amen.*



# JAPAN

## PUNCHING ABOVE THEIR WEIGHT

Located in the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire, Japan comprises 7,000 islands and is subject to frequent earthquakes and tsunamis. Most Japanese live on the largest islands: Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku. A powerful economic force in the world, it has eschewed military buildup. However, tensions in the area over land rights are troubling.

While their religious faith is rooted in Shintoism, more than half claim to have no personal faith. The Christian community is small, less than 2 percent. The Christian message is seen by many as non-Japanese, even though the gospel has had a place there for 500 years.



**Location:** The north Pacific Ocean, close to the eastern borders of North and South Korea, Russia, and China

**Population:** 126 million

**Religion:** Buddhist 70%, with a strong overlapping with Shintoism; 24% "other" (hundreds of newer religions); Christian 1.5%

### DISPATCH

Soon after the threefold disaster of tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear reactor meltdown in 2011, we traveled along the northeast coast of Japan. It's quite impossible to imagine what fifty-foot waves can do to a land and its people. Twenty thousand people died, and areas contaminated by radiation are still unusable. Land sunk by the weight of the sea remains vulnerable to flooding on the cycle of each tide. People from the Fukushima area, the location of the nuclear reactor, were treated like lepers for months following the meltdown. Products manufactured in that area were viewed with suspicion; vegetables understandably, but steel bearings? Fear misconstrues logic.

A sports metaphor came to mind as I watched volunteers working to bring people hope. Boxers competing against someone in a heavier weight class are said to be "punching above their weight," taking on more than one would expect.

In the middle of these sad and hopeless

communities, Christians set about to do what most would never have believed they could do. Their numbers were considered too small to do much.

A small organization formed to help with disasters, ingeniously called CRASH (Christian Relief, Assistance, Support, and Hope), sprang into action hours after the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown. In the wildness of those early days, as people and money and resources poured in, nothing productive would happen unless these resources were coordinated. Samaritan's Purse brought in a military 747 loaded with supplies. But unless these supplies were properly and efficiently distributed to those in need, they would sit in warehouses.

Aided by the Japan Evangelical Association (JEA), CRASH Japan brought together people from all streams of Christian life. When the disaster struck, the leaders of CRASH Japan quickly moved to serve the immediate needs. Seasoned missionaries dropped what they were doing and joined. Young people arrived from

around the world, over 1,700 of them. Japanese Christians set aside their work, and many moved into the five camps set up in the northeast to save lives.

As we traveled with the general secretary of JEA, Reverend Kenishi Shinagawa, and other leaders of CRASH Japan, we met pastors, Christian aid workers, and young people from around the world. Winter was arriving, and people were moving into resettlement camps. Machines continued the laborious job of cleaning up the carnage. Life was trying to get back to normal. But this is Japan, where family and community are everything. Now separated from friends and brutally cut off by death, many were lonely, completely unprepared to face winter without family.

It was then that CRASH Japan, led by Jonathan Wilson, moved into a new phase, providing emotional aftercare. While machines continued their work, Christians focused on the soft underbelly of human trauma—people living alone without hope. It was feared that the suicide rate (already high in Japan) would spike if people were not reached in time.

Japan, one of the most difficult countries in which to advance the gospel, is a curious mixture of intensely focused family and community life with a high regard for ancestors. Japan is also a materialistic culture. The prayer of Christian leaders has been that because of recent disasters the people will give more attention to spiritual matters. Materialism inflicts a spiritual disease that deconstructs the interior—one's spiritual life. The other prayer is that as younger leaders take the place of older ones, the paradigm of small and cell-like congregations may break open into new models, especially in the urban areas where people live far from their places of family ancestry.

For this we can give thanks, that in the midst of disaster the Christian community gives witness of love and care. Soil has been prepared. May the seed of faith find a hospitable place and, with careful nurture, produce a great harvest.

## “YOU STAYED”

A villager told a Japanese pastor, “I’ve watched you Christians. When people from other faiths arrived, they worked to clean up their temples and help their own people, but you Christians, you will help anyone. You didn’t just stay with your own. And I’ve noticed now that most of the others have left. You Christians are still living and working among us.”

Hurray to those who punched above their weight!

## TODAY'S READING

*He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support. He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me.*

—Psalm 18:16–19

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- That there would be a breakthrough of strongholds that keep Christ from being known in Japan.
- That as Christian young people come to Japan to study language and culture, they will bear witness to Christ. Continue to pray and encourage young people to consider this as an intermediate educational experience. One never knows—their hearts may be caught and they will stay.
- Also, teaching English as a second language opens doors for witness. Pray that many will consider this option.
- Pray that the CRASH model of disaster relief will be used in other countries, providing a framework for effective response.
- And pray for the younger generation of leadership, that as they seek new models of witness and congregational life, there will be a move of faith.

## **PRAYER**

*Gracious Lord, in the midst of sorrow and disaster you are ever present. We also know that you use times of tragedy as a way to call people to see your offer of life and salvation. This is our prayer for Japan, a people of extraordinary competence and discipline. We thank you for the response of many following the tsunami to the "cup of cold water" offered in your name. May this witness continue to reverberate, especially through the communities most affected. As people continue to consider the ultimate reality of life after death, may the promise of your resurrection become that which draws them to your love and salvation. Amen.*

# 13 PALESTINE

## POLITICAL COMPLEXITY IS NOT ITS ONLY STORY

Palestine includes the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Authority has been given the responsibility of overseeing their area. The political party Fatah won the election to lead both the West Bank and Gaza, but then Hamas defeated them in Gaza and currently control it.

Most Palestinian Christians are descendants from ancestors of various Christian affiliations: Oriental Orthodoxy, Anglican, Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholic (Eastern and Western rites), and Evangelical/Protestant.

**Location:** Palestine includes what we know as Judea and Samaria. It is landlocked with part of its east boundary (Gaza) on the Dead Sea. It also includes East Jerusalem and is bordered by the Jordan River and the country of Jordan along with the coastline along the western bank of the Dead Sea.



**Population:** 5 million—80% are Palestinian Arabs and 20% Jewish Israelis

**Religion:** Muslim 88%; Christians represent less than 4% of Palestinians in the region: 8% in the West Bank and less than 1% in the Gaza Strip

### DISPATCH

If you've been to Israel as a tourist, there is a good chance that you have gone to Bethlehem to visit the Church of the Nativity but did not stop to visit Christians living in the town.

Here in the very place Jesus was born, Christians live in ever decreasing numbers. This neighborhood, in which Jesus entered earthly existence, is surrounded by religious and political pressures, resulting in a vacating of the area by Christians. Of all the places in the world to pray for, this is one where our brothers and sisters' presence is being notably eroded daily.

The Middle East is a riddling complexity in its decades-old struggle. This chapter is not the place to solve that battle, but it does give occasion to introduce two ministries that speak Christian witness into this important land and people.

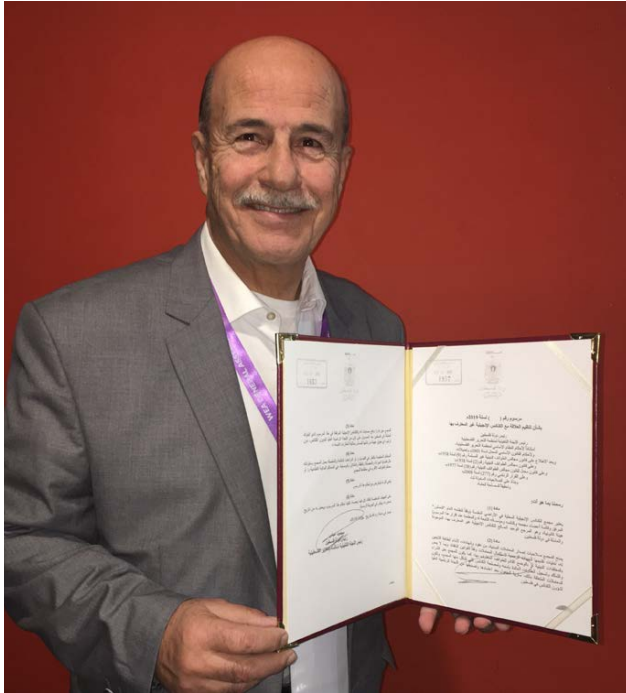
### IN BETHLEHEM

Bethlehem Bible College, located just off the main road to the Church of the Nativity, really matters. Over the years I got to know its former president Bashar Awad and today's president Jack Sara. Each time visiting I asked our driver to stop so I could introduce my friends to both the president and the college.

Now called Bethlehem and Galilee Bible College, it was founded in 1979. Within the stress and misunderstandings that its complex community experience a ministry has developed, a credible and vital ministry of training and education. Awad saw Christians leaving to study in other countries, never to return. He knew he had to stop the flow. Beginning with a modest gift of support, in time they bought an existing center, building additional facilities and expanding from Bethlehem to add a site in Galilee.



Within this small but highly visible world, presence matters. Even though this Bethlehem is the very origin of our Christian beginnings, over the centuries Christians have lost their place here. As in Turkey, the erosion of a Christian population gives way to Muslim



*Palestine-Pastor Munir Kakish, holding certificate of the Council of Local Evangelical Churches in the Holy Land*

dominance, snuffing out both influence and witness and often leading to outright persecution and exclusion. In the West Bank, this attrition continues at an alarming rate.

Christian Palestinians have dropped from 2 percent to 1 percent since 2000. Even though the Palestinian Authority claimed it was committed to equality for all, the Second Intifada impacted many Christians who had hotels and tourist companies. So many left.

Bethlehem Bible College sits in the middle of this loss. The strong will and bold faith of its leadership are about more than retaining a remnant; they are missional in vision, training pastors, helping in the planting of churches and raising visibility of the Gospel among people whose theological rationale is to rid themselves of Christians. Recently, a new student center

was dedicated with a new chapel, cafeteria and lounge areas.

## **MUSALAHA**

*Musalaha*, a word from Arabic, means reconciliation. It was founded and led by Dr. Salim J. Munayer, a Palestinian born in Israel, who moves back and forth between Jerusalem and the West Bank.

The unique mission of Musalaha is to break down hostilities between Messianic Jewish Christians and Arab Christians. The political divide is so deep; one just needs to walk along the fence to feel its hostilities, resentments, hatred, and implied violence. Here is their vision statement: "Musalaha is a non-profit organization that seeks to promote reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians as demonstrated in the life and teaching of Jesus. We seek to be an encouragement and facilitator of reconciliation, first among Palestinian Christians and Messianic Israelis, and then beyond to our respective communities."

Munayer started putting together Palestinians and Israelis, taking them into the desert. Here in isolation, away from symbols and reality, it was a time and place for to reflect, pray and discuss.

Wisely, he knew that he could not start by shaking people loose from their locked-in feelings and views. First, they had to build fellowship and relationships, one by one, learning to trust each other, hearing what they're saying rather than concluding what was intended. Salim notes, "I came to the conclusion that the theology of reconciliation was the best theology to deal with all these issues, and that more than anything else, the Jewish and Palestinian believers needed to be brought together, face to face. Anything less would not work, because of the dehumanization and demonization going on from both sides."

Brother Andrew of Open Doors noted, "Of all the ministries in Israel, I found myself drawn most to this one. It seemed the most ambitious but also the riskiest. It wasn't an idea promoted

by foreign missionaries but was birthed in the local Christian community. It didn't just talk about the problem between Palestinians and Jews. It brought the two sides together and provided a means for them to reconcile."

Salim and I sat one evening just outside of Bethlehem, eating dinner in a restaurant overlooking the Shepherd's Field. To fill out the picture, just behind me was the field Boaz bought so he could marry Ruth, a Moabite and daughter-in-law to Naomi, recently widowed. Boaz, whose name means kinsman redeemer, is an Old Testament precursor to Jesus, our Redeemer.

We talked about wars, prisons, and words. He noted that one couldn't live in either the West Bank or Israel without being engaged in some way in politics. In his book *Seeking and Pursuing Peace*, he wrote, "Everything we say and do has political implications. . . . So we do have a political agenda. We want to see nations in the Middle East, and especially the Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, being reconciled by the gospel. What does that mean? Simply, it means to be reconciled to each other."

In this land of Jesus' birth, may we as Christians from other lands see the witness of Christ through these and other ministries, central to our prayers and support.

### TODAY'S READING

*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

—Ps 51:10–12

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- The seemingly impossible roadblocks to peace frustrate Christians on both sides. Pray for grace in living, that Christians in Palestine will model what it means to be peacemakers, ever showing the true spirit of Jesus of Nazareth whom we confess.
- The role of Bethlehem Bible College is strategic to the work of the gospel in the West Bank and beyond. Pray for its leadership and students and for those whom the Spirit is calling into service.
- The reconciliation ministry of Musalaha, bringing people together in creative interchange of ideas and building of friendship, is vital in building contacts across the divide. Pray for Salim Munayer and his team that the effect of their efforts will bring a harvest of the fruit of peace and love.

### PRAYER

*Father of our Lord Jesus, Savior and King, we continue to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, knowing that within political battles, your Spirit is at work. We pray that there will be a chorus of peacemakers to manifest your ways, bringing this land of your first coming into harmony, so your life will be reproduced in those living there. Prosper Bethlehem College. Fill it with students eager to be your servants. May Musalaha be strong in connecting Israeli and Palestinian Christian young people in learning to love each other, as we are clearly called to do. In your name we ask these prayers, Amen.*

# 4 EGYPT

## A FIRST-CENTURY MIRACLE IN TWENTY- FIRST-CENTURY GARB

Few countries can boast of so much preserved history as Egypt, with its recorded history of centuries before Christ. A walk through the Egyptian Museum, just off Tahrir Square in Cairo, is an introduction to a people proud of their past. The Pyramids and Sphinx tell stories of conquest and fame, and a trip down the Nile River brings one face to face with its incredible history.

**Location:** North Africa on the Mediterranean. Half of its population of 86 million lives alongside the Nile River, a meandering waterway almost 7,000 kilometers or 4,250 miles long, the life source of the nation.



**Population:** 86 million

**Religion:** Muslim (Sunni) 87%;  
Christian 12% (Coptic 10% and  
Evangelical 2%)

### DISPATCH

Whether you travel the chaotic streets of Cairo or cruise down the flowing waters of the Nile, Egypt—ancient, rich in culture, sounds, architecture, and ruins—continues on its political, religious and social journey.

Years since the revolution toppled President Mubarak's thirty-year reign, one can still feel the restless spirit in Tahrir Square, the downtown public plaza in Cairo and center and symbol of its revolution.

What began in the Arab Spring had been a long time coming, and it will be a long time before it finds resolution. The move from a military dictatorship to some form of democracy is a bumpy road.

Some things are certain, and one is that Islam will continue to exert enormous power. The unanswered question is whether Egypt will retain a secular-type structure so that Islam isn't able to enforce sharia laws. The country's 121,000 mosques and imams have immense influence.

While Christians make up 12 percent of the population, this number can be misleading. For example, listed companies show that 32 percent are owned by Christians. Also,

mission agencies appear strategic and forceful, managed by creative and entrepreneurial leaders. Let's meet a few.

### MISSION AGENCIES

**The Bible Society of Egypt** is at the forefront of evangelism. It is large, creatively financed, and highly productive in new forms of literature. In the face of pressure and abuse by the Muslim Brotherhood, they are strategic in planning for the long term and for increased witness. The vision and dreams of the Society are amazing and challenging. They publish for both the Coptic and evangelical communities.

Following the ISIS killing of twenty-one Egyptian Christians in 2015, the Bible Society printed a brochure made up of Scripture and a poem, which in days had more than 1.5 million copies in circulation. A Muslim asked a Christian, "Have you seen this? You can read it, but please give it back, because I only have one and am sharing it with all my friends. I've never read such beautiful verses, and need it back because I am trying to memorize it!"

**The Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Service (CEOSS)**—"Coptic" means

Egyptian—has over 500 staff and 5,000 volunteers. Their range of ministry is amazing. Working with a US \$10 million annual budget, they have remarkable capacity to serve the poor. We visited one of their projects in the slums of Cairo called The Islamic Vision. The CEO described how CEOSS had convinced many imams that female sexual mutilation, and marrying children were both unhealthy practices. I asked an imam sitting to my left for his story.

The imam said he had met Christians who helped him understand the importance of treating women properly and protecting children from abuse. He told me how evangelicals had changed his views, and now in his Friday services at the mosque he was preaching this new message of treating women properly. His gratitude was evident in a warm hug as we left.

**Sat-7** is a television service throughout the Middle East and North Africa. They produce and distribute Christian programming via satellite to millions of Muslim homes. Carefully avoiding clashes with Islam, they produce programs that give an understanding of God's love.

**Habitat for Humanity** works closely with local community groups. They were building some twenty to thirty homes a year a decade ago, and now almost 3,000. Their vision is that for the 20 million now living in poverty, in twenty-five years they will lift 400,000 families—or 2 million people—into a healthy and functioning home.

Here is what amazes me. Habitat, a small organization whose Egyptian chapter was founded by a religious minority, operates in a society where the dominant religion persecutes. Instead of complaining, they lead with this message: "We will work to make your life a better life; your home a better home; your family a better family."

**The Evangelical Theological Seminary** in Cairo, formed in the 1840s, is one of the oldest colleges in Egypt. With qualified faculty and 300 students, this college has an important role in building congregational and mission agency leaders.

## **GARBAGE CITY**

Garbage City is a place like no other. Garbage from Cairo is brought to this center just outside the city, alongside limestone quarries where material was cut for building the pyramids. Some years ago, a Christian businessman was convinced to help those in this most despised of vocations—collecting, sorting, and selling garbage. Father Simon, as he is now called, left his printing shop and got to work. Schools, a medical clinic, and a church sprang up. They discovered they were working on top of an enormous cave. So they excavated and built a 20,000-seat church in the cave. This led to other auditoriums being carved out. During the early days of the Arab Spring, 70,000 Christians concerned about their country gathered in the cave churches for a twelve-hour prayer vigil and praise service while protests were going on in Tahrir Square.

This ministry in an Islamic world is a first-century miracle in twenty-first-century garb. If you want to visit one place in the world where the dynamic of caring for the poor, preaching grace, and the laying on of hands are all nestled in a spectacular and artistic facility, choose Garbage City, Cairo. You will be changed.

Being marginalized doesn't mean we are forced to live at the margins.

## **TODAY'S READING**

*In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and witness to the Lord Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the Lord because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them. So the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they acknowledge the Lord. They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the Lord and keep them. The Lord will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the Lord, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them.*

—Isaiah 19:19–22



## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- The ongoing political upheaval in Egypt creates enormous tensions between various factions. Pray that Egyptian Christians will be proactive in their service to others and will show the way in reconciliation and peace.
- Given that Christians are often under attack, pray for the work of the government, that it will craft laws that will afford liberty of faith to all.
- While many Christians seek to leave the country, pray that many will choose to stay as an ongoing witness. The country needs a solid Christian base for the ongoing presence of congregations and mission agencies that speak to the heart of the Egyptian people. This country matters so much to the well-being of the Middle East.

## PRAYER

*Dear Father, to Egypt, this land to which you sent your son, Jesus, to be protected from the wicked intents of Herod, bring your life and salvation to its people. As the political debates proceed and religious animosity raises its head, Holy Spirit, bring through your people a strong word of peace and reconciliation, so that they will be known more by the words and presence of Jesus than the latest argument or public defense. This is a people and land you love. May Egypt be available to your intents of bringing life and health to their region and the world. Amen.*

# RWANDA

## THE DEVIL NEVER TRAVELS SOLO

Rwanda is a small African country whose people have borne unimaginable sorrow. This dispatch is about the genocide of 1994. We visit with a remarkable Christian leader who helped Rwanda respond to the crisis.

Much of the country is mountainous; its climate is among the finest in the world. Valleys are lush and green with lakes dotting the landscape. In 1962, Rwanda won independence from Belgium, and the next year the UN appointed France as its protector.

**Location:** Central and east Africa near the equator, bordered by Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo



**Population:** 10 million

**Religion:** Christian 90% (includes Roman Catholic 45%, Evangelical and Anglican 35% plus others); Muslim 5%; Ethno-religionist 4%

### DISPATCH

I bit my upper lip and peered through misty eyes as I left the Genocide Museum in Kigali, Rwanda. That this postcard nation would have experienced a holocaust seemed impossible.

People-dehumanizing. Culture-destroying. Soul-demonizing. Life-demolishing. And all to a people whose history, prior to colonization, was a model of national harmony. In 100 days in 1994, over a million were killed; 20 percent of all Rwandans died; 70 percent of Tutsis perished.

I had thought I understood what sparked the slaughter: tribal hatred and warfare, not unlike neighboring countries where intertribal animosities flare up in periodic raids and killings. But what stopped me cold was the historical basis of the genocide. This was not typical tribal warfare between the Hutus and Tutsis. It was a conflict between social classes, not ethnic groups. Yes, there had been rivalries, but nothing in Rwandan history could have predicted this savage butchery.

The key to trying to comprehend this horrific slaughter of a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus is the role of Rwanda's European masters. They drove a wedge between peoples who

for centuries had lived as one. The Hutu and Tutsi have shared the same language and culture since the eleventh century, when the Tutsi (cattle ranchers) came from Ethiopia and the Hutu (farmers) arrived from Chad. Today, it is impossible for most to detect differences in dialect. Physical characteristics are so washed out by intermarriage that Rwandans themselves can't distinguish by appearance. Genetics, I'm told, show no difference.

Then came 1919, when Belgian colonial masters took control and ripped apart his historic merger. Some Tutsi were given government jobs and were generally more highly regarded, while the name "Hutu" became synonymous with "servant." Of the 7 million citizens, 85 percent were eventually classified by ID documents as Hutus and 15 percent as Tutsis.

### IDENTITY CARDS

The Belgians divided and conquered with identity cards that registered each person by "race." Even though in fact just one race existed, the cards served to instill into their self-awareness that each person was of one of the "races." And why this procedure? By dividing

them into social classes, and in using their historic names of Hutu and Tutsi, the colonists set one group against the other.

With the power of government, the Belgians used the ID cards to press Rwandans to buy into this preposterous lie. The government now had its list, a bureaucratic maneuver used by other countries to identify those they might want to discard or promote.



Christian celebration of hope

Sadly, the 1994 holocaust in Rwanda wasn't the country's first. In 1959, 300,000 Tutsi were slaughtered and a million fled into neighboring countries. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the ruling party manipulated public opinion. The Tutsi were increasingly seen as the bad guys. Radio station RTLMC was established with the sole purpose of instilling hatred among the Hutu, poisoning their minds against Tutsi families, neighbors, and co-workers.

In January 1994, in the French magazine *Kangura*, journalist Henry Ngeze wrote of the Tutsi: "We...say to the Inyenzi [cockroaches] that if they lift up their heads again, it will no longer be necessary to go fight the enemy in the bush. We will...start by eliminating the internal enemy....They will disappear."

### **"SHAKING HANDS WITH THE DEVIL"**

General Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian head of the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda, pleaded with his UN masters for authority to step in.

He was refused. He later told us at a prayer breakfast in Toronto that when he shook hands with the leaders of the genocide, he knew he was "shaking hands with the devil." The French, who were responsible for the military at the time, either disregarded the killing surge or had no idea of its severity. Then the fuse was lit.

On April 6, 1994, Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu, was flying into Kigali along with the president of neighboring Burundi, Cyprien Ntaryamira, also a Hutu. A mortar shell blew the plane out of the sky and both were killed. Current president Paul Kagame, who then ran the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), claimed it was Hutu extremists. Who knows?

Within three months, over a million Rwandans died. In Kigali, the killings were led by the Presidential Guard, an elite group of the army, and in the countryside, a militia called Interhamwe was responsible. People were raped, shot, ripped open, cut down, nails driven into skulls, heads bashed in. Today, thousands of skulls can be seen in the many places of memorial.

As numbing as was the visit to the Kigali museum, our time in the village of Nyamata showed the fury that evil can create. Here in one day, 12,000 had been slaughtered in a church and its surrounding compound. We walked between rows of church benches, piled high with clothes worn by those who perished that day. A similar scenario of people seeking refuge was played out in fifty-three other churches.

### **IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE**

But our encounter with these unbelievable horrors was not over. Led downstairs at Nyamata Church, we stepped into a lower room near the back of the building. We first saw what we were becoming accustomed to see: rows upon rows of skulls and bones. Some five feet down was a casket covered by white silk and a cross. Our guide, Leon, told us the story.

Annonciata Mukandoli was twenty-eight years old, reportedly a beautiful Tutsi woman who, though often invited to marriage, had

refused. As the wave of killings swept the region, she was targeted, but they had a special means of death for her. Sharpening a long stick, her murderers inserted it through her torso until it came out her neck. Then they left her to die.

In time, her death became the symbol of calculated evil, and in 2007 authorities gave her a special place of honor and rest. Our emotions were raw as we viewed her casket, imagining the utter terror and pain she endured. I could almost see her frenzied murderers, hungry for annihilation of a people they had been told were their enemies.

Within the shambles of Rwanda, peace and reconciliation gradually emerged. But let it not be forgotten that a European power, prided in its culture and religious heritage, crafted a social experiment and used it to undermine social unity with division. In so doing, it opened the doors to evil. The demonic never travels solo.

Tragically, Christians from all church communities were also involved.

Yet in time, a seed forced from its protective shell shot out its rootlets and gathered strength, enriching itself from the soil of faith. This growing up is a people who reject the notion that they have been victims. Instead, they see their future through the paradigm of hope and reconciliation.

In this brief dispatch, I am reminded that this delta of horror had many contributing streams. Do your own reading and research. I continue to struggle with the age-old question: Where was God in all of this? What I saw was a people determined that hope would rule their lives and country. When we see tragedies developing, we need to pray for those whom God will use to bring restoration and peace.

### TODAY'S READING

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you. Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, Lord.*

*They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength, and by your favor you exalt our horn —Psalm 89:14–17*

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- These vicious stories remind us that evil is not just an idea. Pray for Rwanda and other countries where hatred and vengeance break out.
- Over half of Rwandan parliamentarians are women, elected after the genocide. Pray for their leadership, as they attempt to give hope and organizational direction for the future.
- The justice process has been tedious and long, with many still not convicted. Pray for the wheels of justice, that they would serve the long-term needs of the people, bringing to an end this tragic and catastrophic event.
- The elimination of social distinction between the Tutsi and Hutu is part of the government's attempt to redefine the future. Pray for political leadership as it seeks to build a foundation as a basis for trust.

### PRAYER

*Dear Father and Lord of all, our hearts break as we read about the killing of people created in your image. We sorrow over the loss of life; the terror brought into the lives of the survivors, and the many, many children who grew up without parents and the spouses who now live alone. Gracious Spirit, continue to visit Rwanda with your grace, touching those still in grief. Help young people to envision a different means of solving social conflicts, and birth in their hearts your life which is life anew. In your name, which is above every name, we offer this prayer. Amen.*



# 16 SOUTH KOREA

## THE SECOND LARGEST MISSIONARY-SENDING COUNTRY

South Korea was occupied by Japan from 1910 to 1945. After WWII, the peninsula was divided. The northern part, now called North Korea, was occupied by the Soviet Union and South Korea by the United States. Before the Korean War (1950–1953), over 60% of Koreans lived in the north, but many fled to the south to escape Communist rule.

**Location:** In the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, South Korea borders North Korea and is separated from Japan by the Korea Strait.



**Population:** 50 million

**Religion:** Christian 31%; Nonreligious (though linked to Confucian values) 31%; Buddhist 3%; Ethno-religionist 7%

### DISPATCH

A newcomer may be amazed by the advances South Korea has made in economics and education. Even though crushed by foreign occupation (1910–1945), and then defended by the United States, this southern part of the China peninsula rose from the rubble of the 1950s war to become a showroom of industrial capitalism. It now ranks eleventh among world economies.

The capital city of Seoul is spectacular, and a visitor is struck by its life and energy. During a late autumn visit, we saw trees of orange and red, showing off a city modern while quaint, with a retained memory of its past—a stunning contrast to its cousin in the north.

However, one shouldn't be blind to the soft underbelly of material success. Poverty does exist here. And so does sorrow over their inability to reunite with families to the north—a continuing undercurrent that shapes its policies and energizes its movements, all driven by a profound desire for reunification.

At night, the glow of illuminated crosses dots Seoul's landscape. Christian faith is neither ridiculed nor rejected. It, like reuniting with families caught in the web of North Korea's

paranoia and seclusion, is central to the story of this little nation that defied the odds of postwar politics and moved away from socialism while refusing to buy into secular Western inclinations.

### GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

The story of church growth here is unprecedented. Bigness is neither always good nor effective, but the stories of stunning growth and evangelism in South Korea represent and embody the rise of a nation and voices of faith from which thousands leave this land to serve around the world.

In fewer than six decades, this modest nation leapt to the front in missions. As recipients of foreign mission input, they have ceased being a missionary-receiving country and have become a missionary-sending country. In recent decades they have sent out, each year, over 1,000 long-term missionaries, as many as all the Western churches combined. Estimates are that 20,000 long-term Korean missionaries are active somewhere in the world. Their goal is to have 100,000 by 2030.

Roman Catholics arrived in 1603 and 1801, and Protestants arrived (primarily Methodists

and Presbyterians) in the 1880s. Korean religion differed from Chinese and Japanese religions in that they viewed God as monotheistic, a Creator God.

During the Japanese occupation, seven million Koreans were either deported or killed. Rejecting calls to worship the Japanese Emperor and resisting the pressure of

the practice of faith a politicization that too often divides people on matters of policy.

Christianity grew in their country based on indigenous leadership; that is, Western missionaries placed church leadership in the hands of Korean nationals. So the challenge now is that their missionaries will emulate this model in countries where they are serving.

Observe the convergence of South Korea's history, experience, theology, and world events. They were a people schooled in a religion with a monotheistic base, which may have predisposed them to a Christian view of life. Having been humiliated and subjugated by their occupiers, when liberated by the "Christian" West, their affiliation was naturally to the faith of their liberators. Hardworking and determined, freed from the threat of Communism, and provided with working capital, their export products exploded. Today, be it Hyundai or Samsung, their market skills take a back seat to no one. This vision for the world provided a model for evangelism: if you could take on the world in business, there is no reason you couldn't do the same in missions.

South Korea is a riveting story. Lifted by the dynamic of faith, they are a new center of vision and mission. In the 1800s, the center of world witness was the United Kingdom and Europe. In the 1900s, it moved to North America. It is now shifting to the global south.

The apostle Paul heard from Macedonia and crossed the great geopolitical divide so that Europe would hear the gospel. Today, Koreans hear the call to move into closed and hostile cultures with the message that has changed their nation.



*Pastor Yonggi Cho, pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church Seoul, Geoff Tunnicliffe, Past Secretary General of WEA*

assimilation (including requirements to speak another language and not their own), Koreans embraced Christianity to save themselves and their nation, forging faith and nationalism as mutually reinforcing partners. Christian faith became friend and enabler.

During the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, South Korean churches appointed chaplains to serve in the armed forces. Soldiers who turned to faith became a core of Christians who would lead in the evangelism explosion of the last few decades.

## CHALLENGES

The Korean church is not without its challenges. In a competitive society, relationships can be strained. With an estimated 150 Presbyterian denominations alone, plus other denominations, the potential for division is high. As well, the attaching of religion to nationalism can build into

## TODAY'S READING

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his*

*love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

*—Psalm 103:7-12*

## **ITEMS FOR PRAYER**

- There is much to praise God for in the rise of the South Korean church. Their dynamic witness is strong and resilient. Pray for their leadership, including those who lead large congregations.
- Given its amazing economic strength and vision to reach out culturally, pray for its missionary enterprise, that its people will recognize the importance of being culturally sensitive and cooperating with Christians in countries to which they are sent.
- Internally, given the growth of many large ministries, pray for a spirit of cooperation and humility among leaders so they will model for

their people a servant heart and replicate that in the many countries in which they minister.

## **PRAYER**

*Gracious Father, Lord of all, we give thanks for the ways in which your Spirit has brought life to the South Korean people. We praise you for the energetic spirit of its leaders and people to witness and give to the growing of your church. As they expand their missionary enterprise to many countries, may wisdom and grace characterize their going and may a godly spirit of cooperation mediate their relationships. May the leaders discern the importance of allowing Christ to rule, keeping the patriotic emotion under the authority of Christ and his kingdom. In your strong and holy name we pray. Amen.*

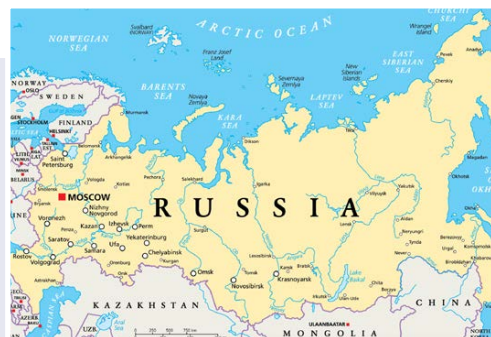
# RUSSIA

## SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The Russian Empire existed as a state from 1721 to 1917. The largest country landmass in the world, its empire touched three continents. In the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, led by Lenin, turned it into a Communist state. In time, the empire expanded to become the Soviet Union, a territorial control lost in 1989.

Today, with a sizable population and vast natural resources, Russia continues to seek its place in the changing political landscape.

For centuries, the Orthodox Church was its established faith. During Communist rule, they along with evangelicals were persecuted: 200,000 Christian leaders were martyred, and Evangelicals were not allowed to build churches or conduct services. Today the church has considerable freedom, although there is concern that the relationship between government and the Orthodox Church may blur the separation of church and state.



**Location:** It shares land borders with Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, China, Mongolia, and North Korea and maritime borders with Japan and the United States (Alaska).

**Population:** 144 million

**Religion:** Christian 67% (Orthodox 64%, Evangelical 2%); Muslim 12%

### DISPATCH

I walked up the many steps to the preaching pulpit in Central Baptist Church near Red Square in Moscow. As I looked down to the congregation, I recalled a picture of Billy Graham preaching from that same pulpit when the Soviet Union ruled.

What I didn't know was that the church had been kept open by a curious historical circumstance. It was 1941 and Stalin was doing his best to persuade U.S. President Roosevelt to enter the fray of the war and create a second line of defense for the Soviets against Hitler. Negotiations shifted from side to side. Finally, Roosevelt agreed. But included in the agreement was a promise by Stalin to keep open Central Baptist, the only Protestant church allowed.

Today much has changed. While surveillance continues, churches are being planted and ministries initiated. Now it isn't a carryover of atheistic communism that proves to be a challenge. Instead, it's living as a Christian

minority. The Russian Orthodox Church, founded by Greek Orthodox missionaries in the 900s, implanted their vision of religious hegemony. Infringement by another Christian community, be it Evangelical or Roman Catholic, is viewed as predatory. Other forms of Christian faith are considered sects at best and cults at worst.

This sense of proprietary presence was triggered after 1989 with the breakup of the Soviet Union. Western missions booked their flights and arrived to evangelize. Seen as a western religion, Evangelicalism crossed a border deemed sacred. The fear among the Orthodox was reinforced as Evangelical agencies recruited short-term missionaries, operated with little or no language skills, and proved deficient in cultural sensitivity.

I asked a group of Christian leaders how and when they came to faith. Most did so in the early 1990s from these very missions. The arrival of western groups brought results, but as the excitement of ministering in a formerly closed



country waned, fewer came and there was less support. The initial flurry of people and resources had created a bubble of expectation, and when it burst Russian Christians were left on their own.

## A COMPLEX CULTURE

Russia is a land of contradictions with a deep and rich history. Some of the world's greatest writers are Russian: Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Solzhenitsyn; and composers: Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky. In sports they stand atop the world podium. Canadians know our greatest 20th century sporting moment was



the 1972 World Hockey series, when Paul Henderson scored a goal just before the end of the final game of the Russian/Canadian series.

Recall 20th-century Russia and how its political leaders—Lenin and Stalin—used mass starvation and slaughter to protect and advance their ideological formulations.

Russians have an amazing sense of self-awareness, described to me this way: there is a heaviness and weariness of the soul, and for

good reason. In the past century some 20 million died by war, killings and forced starvation at the hands of government. (The actual numbers vary according to the source.) They were taught that their ideology was superior, only years later to realize its deficiencies. For decades they lived under surveillance and fear, not knowing who even among their own family would report words or actions deemed offensive to the secret police. Within the soul of the Russian people there lingers heartbreak from decades of dictatorial control, and now (at the time of writing) they are bombing and killing their Ukrainian neighbors.

Today its search is for national identity. Nurtured by the Orthodox Church for a millennium, its identity was overturned and rudely redefined by a Marxist/Leninist vision, only then to see its socialism morph into a mixed form of capitalism. Follow their history: Wrenched from the brutal rule of Czarist régimes in the early 20th century, they were strong-armed by a Communist régime unmatched for its destructive powers. Now that their ideal has been broken, they ask, who are we?

## MOVING AHEAD

What is the way forward for a Christ-centered witness? There is no simple or singular answer. Russians are Asian and Slavic, not Western. They evaluate matters of faith slowly and tradition is powerful. A primary means of evangelism is to understand others in their pain and suffering. I was told, "If someone knows you too have walked the valley of sorrow, they will listen for they know you understand." The message "Jesus makes one happy" isn't as convincing as identity in suffering. Of course, the hope of the Lord's return is reassuring to them.

Leadership is central to shaping the future, but what kind of leadership? For centuries they've lived under a dictatorial, untrusting elite who resorted to secret surveillance to maintain power. The culture has been so polluted by secrecy that it takes a spiritual revolution among its leaders for them to govern in the manner of Christ. The war against Ukraine has changed

their world. Persuaded by President Putin of the need for them to take on Ukraine, to rescue the Orthodox Church from the influence of the west, to diminish a Ukrainian sense of being a nation and to build a hedge between Russia and European and American powers, Russians accepted his rationale. As the war rages on, it is impossible to predict or even imagine how Russians will be framed by the emerging facts and details of both why the war began, how they can justify killing their neighbors and how their Christian leaders can rebuild a working relationship with Ukrainian church leaders.

It so matters that we pray for those currently leading the church, as they respond to what has transpired, and then for the coming generations of Russian Christian leaders, that the servant paradigm, the Jesus model, will affect their witness. Keep in mind the enormous influence Russia has in Central Asia and the many "stans." Can you imagine the impact such a community will make when fashioned not by mistrust, secrecy, and brutality, but by the love of the risen Lord? Into other parts of the world, they will in time go as the Spirit uses their experience of faithfulness in tough and hostile environments.

The apostle Paul knew it, and we pray that Russian Christians will know it as well.

### TODAY'S READING

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me. —Psalm 13*

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Christians in Russia are naturally supportive of their own country and people. Pray that they will have wisdom and freedom of heart

to also pray for governments other than their own in whose countries Russian influence is historic and where it continues.

- May a spirit of peace become characteristic of its politics and policies, showing the world how the Christian message can bring change and help to all they influence.
- That pastors will exercise grace, led by a holy wisdom in guiding their people to live in the ways of the Gospel, looking for ways to bring healing into their own lives, and be peacemakers with their neighbors, especially Ukrainians.
- Russians have survived much in their recent past. Pray for church leaders as they navigate the political shoals, that integrity will reign and the joy of servanthood will characterize their leadership.
- Given the dominant place of the Orthodox Church, pray that their leadership will foster a spirit of freedom and opportunity so that the name of Jesus will be known in the land.
- There is a severe lack of funding and training for pastoral and missional leaders. Pray that as the economy grows that indigenous leadership be strong with a clear voice for the Gospel.

### PRAYER

*Gracious Father, we pray for the Russian people, so creative and with such a rich culture, yet living through such trying times, learning to survive. May those of us outside their world appreciate and understand and be sensitive to their feelings of national pride and hopes for the future. We pray for their young people and the various ministries reaching out to them. We pray for churches and pastoral leadership as they create the setting for faith and loving friendships. Holy Spirit, visit this land and people in your special way, bringing them joy that comes with your presence. May they know your fullness and, in the spirit of your mission, be spiritual benefactors to countries in their region. Amen.*

# 18 NICARAGUA

## BEFORE AND AFTER

The Somoza family, a hereditary dictatorship, ruled Nicaragua for forty-three years. During the 1970s, the Sandinistas, led by Daniel Ortega, rebelled against the Somozas and finally deposed them in 1979. The Contras then attempted to unseat the Sandinistas but lost; some 30,000 died during this period.

**Location:** Nicaragua is the largest of Central American countries, with Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south, just north of the Equator. On the west is the Pacific Ocean and on the east the Caribbean Sea.



**Population:** 6 million

**Religion:** Christian 96%  
(includes Roman Catholics 70%;  
Evangelical/Protestant 29%)



### DISPATCH

Dorestela Medina Mendieta was a revolutionary even before she joined Daniel Ortega's fighters in 1973. While in seventh grade, she was already writing letters and organizing protests against the Somoza dictatorship. Her mother sent her on a student exchange program to the United States, hoping this would clear her head of this revolutionary nonsense. But after she returned, at eighteen, she left home and joined Ortega's forces. This young radical, steamed by the abuses of a dictatorship, was charmed by the ideas and personality of Ortega. It was heady days for young radicals. For a time, U.S. President Jimmy Carter supported Ortega until he learned that he was helping to arm the

Salvadorian rebels.

In 1979, when Ortega's Sandinistas took power, his new government called on the young revolutionary Dorestela to be part of the leadership team. She was appointed subdirector of immigration. Traveling back and forth to Cuba, she relied on Russia, Cuba, and Germany to help put an immigration system in place. Fighting broke out as the U.S. turned to support the Contras out of Honduras.

Now ranked fourth in the army, she was called to fire up the Nicaraguan troops as they moved to protect her government. Later she was put in charge of running prisons and combatting charges leveled against the Sandinistas about human rights abuses.

In 1995, after her soldier-husband had died, Dorestela had had enough and left her government position. After working for various embassies and struggling with a restless and peace-vacant heart, even testing "new age" variations, she finally said yes to an invitation to attend a spiritual retreat. For three days they studied through the passion of Jesus, his death and resurrection. She told me, "Brian, I cried the entire three days. Jesus touched my heart. When I faced who Jesus was and why he came, I knew then I could follow him. I felt much like the women in the New Testament who poured



perfume on the feet of Jesus even though those around criticized. I heard him say, 'Dorestela, I am your peace. I care for you. I will give you hope.' It was then my life was changed.

"My friends and even my brother said, 'Oh, you are now like Saint Paul. You fought Jesus and now you are loving him.'"

*What led her from her conversion to her current vocation?* I wondered. It's not surprising that the past is foundational for the future.

After her conversion she had asked, "Lord, what can I do for you now?" *Take care of my children*, an inner voice responded. But that made no sense. She had children and family, but surely that wasn't what the voice meant.

For two weeks she prayed and stewed about the message. Suddenly it dawned on her. "Of course. He wants me to take care of those who as minister I was in charge of, but with a different feeling and attitude. Prisoners."

"So what were your feelings about them when you were minister?" I queried. Her head dropped. "I had no feelings for them then. In fact, I had an uncle and cousin in prison who had been there for ten years. I never once visited them—didn't even bring them a toothbrush."

Knowing it wouldn't be easy to show up visiting prisons as the former minister of prisons, she joined Prison Fellowship (PFI) as a volunteer. At first prison officials wondered what was going on. What kind of trick might she be playing on them? They didn't buy her story about spiritual transformation. But, in time, week by week, as she faithfully cared for those in prison, she built confidence in herself and trust among the guards, prison officials and inmates.

Today, Dorestela is regional director of Prison Fellowship International for Latin America and Mexico, overseeing its ministry. How did this revolutionary spirit, caught up in throwing bombs and robbing banks, end up here? Another story of Spirit-intruding grace, catching a heart passionate about values and truth, transforming and shaping it to love and serve those she had earlier despised.

During our visit we walked with Dorestela and Monseigneur Pena, head of the country's

PFI, into La Modelo Prison in Managua. Before we got through the gate, loud drum-driven gospel music filled the air. The service was in full swing. The band of rhythm and bass guitars, drums, bongo, and a creative keyboard were pumping out their beat. Latin music is wonderfully different. Then came three sermons—they were in no hurry. Father Pena, who could put the best of evangelical preachers to shame, offered the grace only Jesus gives. Ron Nikkel (who over thirty-three years founded 127 national Prison Fellowships) and I did our best to match his passion. No one wanted it to end until a guard walked in and, with a nod, gave the signal to finish.

Across Latin America and Mexico, Dorestela oversees sixteen countries with 6,700 volunteers working in many of the 2,500 prisons that hold some 1.2 million prisoners. From a revolutionary teenager, loathing brutal overlords, to being a cabinet minister in a new government, young as she was, in time her restless heart wasn't at rest until it found peace in her living Lord.

As we see conflict breaking up countries, putting one at war with another, we pray, knowing the Spirit is there in the middle of difficulty, always at work where anger and revenge seem to rule. His eye is on that one or two he can and will use in the future. There is no place he is not present. Praying for his incursion into such hearts is our cherished privilege and mandated action.

There is no heart, regardless of its antipathy, resentment or flat-out brutality, from which God is absent.

## **TODAY'S READING (DORESTELA'S LIFE VERSES)**

*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full*



*acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

1 Timothy 1:12–17

### **ITEMS FOR PRAYER**

- The influence of prison ministries has helped to change the conditions of prison life in Nicaragua. Continue to pray for their volunteers and leaders as they work every week, both with those inside and their families on the outside who are often the forgotten ones.
- All of Central America is a conduit for drug smuggling. Young people waste their lives as they try to make a living or a fast buck, only then to languish in prison for years. It

is to these, among others, that volunteers bring hope and life. Pray for the one-to-one visits so that the Spirit of Christ will reign and bring liberation.

### **PRAYER**

*Gracious Lord, we praise you for those your Spirit calls and draws from self-interest into service. Give wisdom and strength to Dorestela as she oversees the thousands of volunteers and leaders in Latin America. May there be a lovefest among Christians for those in prison. May your Word, your call to care for prisoners, be so strong, not only here but also worldwide, that prison officials will see the power of your grace and allow the effective ministry of those so called and gifted. Your kingdom come, we pray, for prisons in this part of the world and everywhere. In your victorious name we give thanks. Amen.*

# 19 INDONESIA

## A JAW DROPPER

Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world and the largest Muslim country. Its land mass is an archipelago, made up of more than 13,000 islands that are home to 700 distinct people groups. For over 300 years the Dutch were its colonial masters, a control broken after WWII.

Its national motto is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*—"Unity in Diversity" or "Many yet One." While it promises religious freedom, with Muslims being 88 percent of the population, there are times and places where Christians are under attack.



**Location:** Stretched out over the Indian and Pacific Oceans, its neighbors are Papua New Guinea, East Timor, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Australia.

**Population:** 245 million

**Religion:** Muslim 88%; Christian 11%; Hindu 1%

### DISPATCH

When I heard of radical Islamists burning down churches in Indonesia and killing Christians, I wasn't prepared to also stories of remarkable witness and of surprising enterprise in this incredibly complex country.

Mission work is tough, be it at home or half a world away. Media focus from Indonesia almost exclusively reports killings, persecution, war, and bribery. Little do we learn of what is advancing the Christian faith. Among its thousands of islands, here are two stories.

We visited Kirk and Shelley Kaufeldt, who are on staff at a university in Jakarta. I had heard it was a Christian university and assumed it would be struggling to survive since it is located in a Muslim-majority nation. I've been to Indonesia before and heard the sad stories of Muslim oppression and Christians losing their lives.

As we drove onto the campus, my jaw dropped. The university is stunning, with over 10,000 students. Clearly Christian in format and evangelical in emphasis, it includes a medical training hospital and even an Olympic-size pool. Its leadership has a strategy to build campuses across Indonesia. Capital costs come from the business enterprises of the family responsible for its creation and operation. It charges a reasonable tuition rate,

not too high but enough to ensure that its students are serious. The school is approved by the accrediting authority and has full university status with the Indonesian government.

Following Kirk into the student cafeteria, I asked, "So this is your average Christian center of education in a Muslim-majority world? How did this come about?"

### A FAMILY'S VISION

It began with a businessman deeply committed to the spread of the gospel, followed by his son who has built a large business enterprise in Indonesia. They chose to make education and medical care their primary ministry. They support primary and secondary schools throughout the islands. The School of Education at the university is reserved for Christians. These students are given full scholarships with their promise that they will spend four years after graduation, teaching in one of the associated schools. The name, Universitas Pelita Harapan, means Hope and Light.

Hospitals are developed not as money-making enterprises but to encourage people to cross the barrier of fear of getting medical treatment.

Here, tucked away in the fourth most populous country in the world, is a vision driven

by a Christian family and their enterprise to engage their world with the love and message of the Lord, focusing on two areas through which that witness can shine with hope.

## **AN IMPROBABLE REQUIREMENT**

Meet my now-deceased friend Dr. Chris Marantika, whose story is one of a kind. Unique in its creativity and remarkable in its outcome, it reminds us that in places and times when it seems impossible, the Spirit is building Christ's church.

At twelve years of age and wanting more than what local education could offer, Chris left his island for Java, where through the witness of missionaries he heard of Christ. After graduating from university, he wanted more and managed entry to the United States, where he completed his seminary training.

After hearing him speak at his pastors' conference at the seminary in Yogyakarta, about 350 miles southeast of Jakarta, I asked how the seminary had developed. When he returned home from his overseas study, he decided the best way to help build the church in Indonesia would be to plant churches. Since that plan needed pastors, he created the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Indonesia.

Here is what I found to be ingenious. A condition of graduation was that each student would be required to plant a church of thirty new adult converts. No transfers counted. Under the banner of Vision Indonesia and the slogan "1:1:1," Chris called people to work and pray. The numbers stand for one church, in each village and town, in one generation. Thus, the seminary's mantra: "1:1:1."

I visited a church planted by a graduate. Driving into the jungle, as we turned the narrow road, we saw a newly built church. I asked the pastor how they were able to erect it in the middle of an Islamic community. Here was their creative strategy. They decided to work with criminals. Their logic was that if Islamic leaders saw criminals transformed by Christ and their

lives changed, they might be more hospitable in allowing them to start a church.

And that's what happened. In time, Muslim leaders saw criminals reformed and living at peace, and so they welcomed the seminary students to build a church and even gave them land. Wanting to foster a continuing and welcomed presence, they asked the Muslim elders if they could begin a midweek service. This was allowed. So what about Sunday services? That will come, the pastor promised. "But why not now?" I asked. "We will continue to minister and see conversions and in time the elders will want us to have our Christian Sunday services," was the response.

A reminder that the Spirit is ever about his work in places we least suspect.

## **TODAY'S READING**

*How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you, that you bestow in the sight of all, on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence you hide them from all human intrigues; you keep them safe in your dwelling from accusing tongues*  
—Psalm 31:19–20

## **ITEMS FOR PRAYER**

- While it's important for us to be encouraged by stories of effective outreach, please continue to pray for the protection and well-being of those in Indonesia who face danger at the forefront, leading churches and missions.
- Pray for these two centers of training, among the many sprinkled across the islands, and for teachers as they inspire their students to follow Christ.
- In a land so dominated by a religious majority and given the danger of radical groups rising up in jihad, pray for wisdom and grace among its political leadership that the country will continue to foster peace among its many social, political, and religious groupings.

## **PRAYER**

*Dear Father, as you cast your eyes across the wide expanse of this land of Indonesia, we know your heart is drawn to its people, so varied, kind, and resilient, yet so needy. Your call is for all to hear of the living and giving truth of your Son, our Lord Jesus. Today, as we visualize this land and its people, we pray for the training of younger men and women. Continue to bless the many training centers and the seminary and Universitas Pelita Harapan. Within this new generation, fire hearts of younger leaders with courage and a strong pull to be centered in you so they can lead the nation for your glory. Amen.*



# 20 VIETNAM

## A PLACE OF SURPRISES

**Vietnam became a household word because of its war.**

For a millennium, Vietnam was part of China, but in time it became independent. Colonized by the French in the mid-1800s, Japan briefly was occupier (1940s) but was thrown out by France. In 1954 the French were expelled and the country divided into the north and south, two areas locked in deep conflict and hostility, with the United States intervening but forced to leave in 1975. Today, both the north and south are under an authoritarian Communist government.

**Location:** China lies to the north; Laos is to the northwest, Cambodia borders to the southwest, and the South China Sea is to the east

**Population:** 90 million

**Religion:** Buddhist 52%; Christian 10% (Roman Catholics the majority); Ethno-religionist 8%



### DISPATCH

For many people, Vietnam triggers memories of war, communism, control, persecution, and death. This land and people are complex and its stories many, one of five remaining socialistic dictatorships ruled by Communist ideology, circumscribing its assumptions and demands.

Not surprisingly, it is a country of contradictions that were made infamous by wars with the French and the Americans. The "domino theory" was the popular explanation for war in the 1960s and 1970s, an attempt to prevent the Chinese and Vietnamese from extending Communist rule throughout southeast Asia. Being closed to Christianity for so many years, I assumed the gospel was underground. I found that it is and it isn't.

My first stereotype was shattered outside of Ho Chi Minh City, still called Saigon by many. We arrived at the campus of the Biblical and Theological Institute of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam South (ECVN/S), a denomination

still often called C&MA (Christian and Missionary Alliance). To the left I saw a multistory building housing classrooms and administration for 150 students. To my right was a seven-story student residence. In front of me was a 3,000-seat church. All this in a Communist country that continues to enforce unpredictable and contradictory laws.

The other side of the story is the control the government has over all matters religious: a one-party government shaped by Communist-materialistic ideology. My prudent friends reminded me not to be lulled into thinking the government has gone soft on Christianity. They had many stories describing the quick and harsh reminders of who is boss.

Yet within these polarities, Christian faith is pulsating through varying contradictions: unease with government; conflicts and division within the Christian community; a country seeking to emerge from the wars of the past.

## BACKGROUND

About two-thirds of the Protestant church (also called the Tin Lanh church) is made up of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN). Started by the Christian and Missionary Alliance in 1911, it is, in effect, the traditional church. It has been divided into two separate operating denominations (north and south) since 1954. Although they want to reunite, the government interferes—a reminder of the delicate road leaders must walk in keeping their people out of the crosshairs of government enforcement.

There are about eighty denominations, which reflect either people's cultural mistrust or their choice to create their own independent church or group of churches. At times, these have been financially supported by well-meaning Westerners. Twenty-seven denominations are members of the southern Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship; twelve belong to the northern Hanoi Christian Fellowship.

A "denomination" is often an overstatement, as it may mean just a collection of a few house churches led by a strong pastor, which may fade away once his presence is diminished.

Also, the term "house church" is often a figure of speech. We rode down a river in the Mekong Delta in a dugout to meet a pastor of a house church. We stepped onto the dock and saw a beautiful church building seating over a hundred people. I exclaimed, "I thought we were visiting a house church." We are, I was told. A Korean donor wanted them to have a chapel. Not looking like a house church to me, it still is counted as one.

The term *house church* does not always refer to where congregations meet. Most often, it means a congregation that is not registered with the government. Many "house churches" meet in a large house to avoid being shut down. Most house churches have 30 to 150 in attendance. Some build without government permission, while others work to secure permission. There is a drive to build churches to give cultural presence to their faith. Usually, only congregations worshiping in a church-type

building are shown to foreigners.

The soul of the Vietnamese people has not been lost. Its Christian witness is led by pastors and leaders, fearless yet wise. Their story is just being told.



## TODAY'S READING

*May the Lord answer you when you are in distress; may the name of the God of Jacob protect you. May he send you help from his sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the Lord grant all your requests . . . Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.*

—Psalm 20:1–5, 7

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Living under a Communist régime creates mistrust and fear of others. Pray that within the leadership of churches and Christian missions in Vietnam there will be a spirit of peace and trust, so that the life of Christ will be manifested to the society and its political and social leaders.
- Bibles continue to be needed for the advance of the gospel witness and the nurture of the people of God. Pray especially for the release of Bibles in the various languages of ethnic groups in Vietnam.

- Among the mountain tribal people, the church has enjoyed remarkable. However, the government often harasses these people. Pray for their protection and that leaders from these groups would raise a dynamic and forceful witness for Christ.

### **PRAYER**

*Gracious Lord and God, we have learned that often out of suffering, deprivation, and persecution your church rises in strength. The people of Vietnam have not only known years of war but continue to experience intermittent harassment by its government. First, we pray for Christians in Vietnam, that their faith would be strong and their commitment to Christ clear and uncompromising. We also pray for a reversal of government incursion that persecutes your people. Our trust is in you, that your Spirit will bring to this land a continuing flow of ministry that will surprise even the most agnostic. In your wonderful and mighty name we pray. Amen.*

# KAZAKHSTAN

## LANDLOCKED BUT FINDING FREEDOM OF FAITH

Kazakhstan is the largest landlocked country and ninth-largest land mass in the world. Since the 1700s, it has been influenced and often controlled by Russia or the Soviet Empire. It was the last of Soviet territories to proclaim independence. The country has 131 identifiable ethnicities, and the Russian language has equal status with the Kazakh language.



**Location:** South of Russia, touching Mongolia and China to the east, and bordered on the south by the many "Stans" of Central Asia

**Population:** 16 million

**Religion:** Muslim 54%; Nonreligious 34%; Christian 12% (Orthodox 10%, Roman Catholic 1%, Evangelical 1%)

### DISPATCH

Chances are you haven't visited this Central Asian country or heard much about it apart from seeing it on television, as Russian crews land from the space station. Much like Alberta in Western Canada or Montana in the USA, sweeping wheat fields kiss high-peaked mountains. Huge in land mass but with a small population, this country of crisscrossing cultures has survived invasions and domination by China and Russia for 700 years. Today it stands at the edge of a remarkable time of development.

Its life with and alongside Russia is a defining dynamic. While the country's majority group is Kazakh, one-third are Russian. Indigenous Kazakhs rub shoulders with Russian Kazakhs, creating tensions that are not lessened by the country's 6,846-kilometer border with Russia on the north. In the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of Kazakhs died under Stalin's purge in gulags known as Karlags.

Their religion could be called "Muslim light," since the prevailing influence continues to be shamanism (worship of ancestral spirits). During forty years of communist rule, Christian faith was severely repressed. The fall of the Soviet

Union in 1991 and subsequent independence for its satellite countries triggered an outbreak of Christian growth. In Kazakhstan, it is estimated that there were 100,000 Christian converts from 1993 to 1997, along with an inflow of 700 missionaries.

In 2011 the government enacted a bill forcing missionaries out and requiring churches to group into larger congregations. This resulted in cutting the number of churches almost in half. Colleges and seminaries were closed as well. While there is freedom to live as a Christian, this law makes ministry more complex. Almost anything you want to do is inhibited by red tape. As I visit countries and cultures, most often people are my best windows to understanding.

### MEET TWO PASTORS

Ahaman Egizbaev was born to Kazakh parents, both senior Soviet apparatchiks (officials in the Soviet-run Kazakh bureaucracy). Being Kazakh, they were considered Muslims. After studying engineering in Moscow, Ahaman took a job in Kazakhstan. One day his driver gave him C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Raised in a materialistic ideology, Ahaman had no clue on matters of



faith. Yet when he read it, he said, "I dropped to my knees and confessed my sins to Christ. I got up not only united with God but freed instantly from my addictions."

When his father heard what Ahaman had done, he retorted, "You can't be Christian, you're Muslim"—this from a father who never had taken him to a mosque or introduced him to the Muslim faith.



■ *Kazakhstan-Church Leaders*

Ahaman's curiosity led him to study at a local Bible college and then at ACTS, an interdenominational college in Seoul, Korea. He learned pastoral skills and English, and there he discovered a deep desire to return to his homeland as a missionary. Even though he was with his own Kazakh people, he didn't speak their language—he knew only Russian. Growing up in a Communist home immersed in the Soviet/Russian culture, he had no occasion to learn of his Kazakh heritage. Today he pastors a Kazakh church with a vision to open a Christian university and seminary. He also serves as general secretary for the Evangelical Alliance of Kazakhstan.

Yerkin Khaidarov is a young pastor who also came from a nonpracticing Muslim world, but his was radically different. He was a teenager in the 1980s, a time when drugs ran freely from Afghanistan north through his city of Almaty to Russia. By college, he was an addict. His

father, desperate to free his son, tried every possible therapy and medical treatment. One day he heard of Teen Challenge, a ministry for those trapped by drug addiction. Though it was Christian, he decided being a Muslim wouldn't stop him from grasping at any straw.

He met Doug Boyle, an Australian Assemblies of God missionary, himself a former addict who had founded Teen Challenge in Kazakhstan. The first visit was almost too much for Yerkin, especially when he learned that he would have to go cold turkey—go off all drugs at once.

He agreed, but mandatory daily chapel attendance was too much and he ran away, living for two years on the streets. Eventually his father confronted him: "Son, you either go back to Teen Challenge or leave our home. On the streets, you'll die an early death or end up in prison. Your choice."

Cornered, Yerkin returned and eighteen months later left as a graduate. Today he pastors nine churches in which many participants are graduates of Teen Challenge who are now rescuing others. There he met his Armenian wife, Madlen, a musician.

## **WHAT LIES AHEAD?**

This country of beauty, rough and raw in its early days of modernizing, has made a remarkable economic leap forward. Young and resourceful men and women are leading the evangelical church, learning to negotiate the tightrope of politics. However, the church is divided generationally. Both Baptists and Pentecostals are split between the older generation, reinforced by an aging fundamentalism, and the younger charismatics, praying and pressing for growth and new churches and ministries.

While in Almaty, I met leaders from surrounding countries (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Iran). Many are facing the same kinds of issues as Kazakhstan, and they had gathered for their annual two days of prayer and fasting. They're joining in common cause, building

evangelical alliances in their countries and creating a Central Asia alliance. Their strength is that they share many common resources; their cultures have similar crossovers and most speak Russian. They all know what it was like to live under Soviet dominance, and they understand the rough-and-tumble nature of surviving in Islamic-dominated lands. Their commitment to building friendships, developing common training, exchanging resources, and mutually nurturing their churches makes good sense.

Here kingdom possibilities grab my attention. This region might very well be on the brink of a major spiritual advance. Creative and prayer-bathed evangelism can bring life to a people hungering for what the old materialism failed to offer and what a nominal Muslim faith lacks. A modest amount of outside resources can make an enormous impact. Prayer focused on this country and its people will multiply as the Spirit brings a consciousness of the risen Christ.

### TODAY'S READING

*May the mountains bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness. May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor. May he endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. May he be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth. In his days may the righteous flourish and prosperity abound till the moon is no more.*

—Psalm 72:3-7

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- After the government passed a restrictive law a decade ago, most missionaries left

Kazakhstan, taking with them the support provided from their home sending countries. This resulted in a precipitous loss of funds for nationals and their ministries. Pray for generosity of support from outside, and a growing obedience of giving internally.

- There is a vital need to create training centers for pastors and leaders. It is important for a pastor to have a recognized certificate or degree. Pray for Kazakh Christians' initiative in building indigenous colleges and seminaries.
- It really matters that the evangelical churches have official recognition from the government. Pray for wisdom for the churches' leaders as they facilitate their ministries and churches in operating within a complex political and social world.

### PRAYER

*Father, creator of lands where the beauty of nature and resources of the earth are magnificent reminders of your creative power, we lift our voices in prayer. Today we pray for our brothers and sisters in Kazakhstan, living in such a spectacular vista of land, yet often pressed on all sides by both anti-religion and other faiths. We pray for institutions where coming leaders can learn of your Word and be trained in spiritual leadership. As well, give leaders grace and wisdom as they walk the winding, uneven roads of political and civic recognition, all for the sake of being free to make known your life and truth to the people of this land you so love. We pray this in faith, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

# THAILAND

## THE POWER OF INDIGENEOUS LEADERSHIP

Thailand (formerly called Siam) is a monarchy, the current king having served since 1946. Thailand has never been ruled by a Western power. However, its political system is rife with inner conflict and division.

**Location:** Southeast Asia, as part of the Indochina peninsula, surrounded on the south by the Gulf of Thailand, on the west by the Andaman Sea, and by the countries of Myanmar/Burma, Laos and Cambodia.

**Population:** 70 million

**Religion:** Buddhism 85%; Muslim 8%; Christian 1%



### DISPATCH

As I visit countries, meeting leaders, pastors, and people from all walks of life, I'm intrigued to learn each country's spiritual health, struggles, and some of their stories.

In Thailand, one question kept surfacing. Speaking with pastors, educators and mission leaders, I heard it time and again. I wanted to understand the question in its context—a land of lush landscape, neighborhoods remarkably clean, and people incredibly respectful and kind. My question was this: After all the people, money and years invested in missions, why is the Christian church here so small?

Thailand, one of the southeast Asia "Tigers," while looking somewhat like Malaysia and Myanmar/Burma, is as different from them as Canada is from the USA or Sweden is from Germany. Never colonized, in the nineteenth century it negotiated land for freedom to stay out of the clutches of France and Great Britain, unlike Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. Today its national personality avoids conflict, all the while keeping face and not losing position.

National pride is palpable. Pictures of the king and queen dot the landscape. Politicians may be vilified, but if one dares to offer criticisms of its royalty, the gentle Thai will rise in defense. Royalty is linked to nationalism. It took just a few minutes in a major museum to notice their unqualified patriotism when describing the greatness of their nation and leaders, history, and people. Although Thai national Christian leaders tend to be modest, even their tone shifts when they express pride in their nation.

Completing the trilogy of national character, along with royalty and nationalism, is their religion, Buddhism. This is expected to be Buddhist. To adopt another religion is viewed as rejecting one's nationhood, tantamount to denying one's identity. It's not surprising that evangelism has to buck this profound synthesis of nation, religion, and individuals.

Their fixation on Buddhism is powerful and overwhelming. More than the presence of temples and the role of temple attendance, what dominates is a consciousness of the spirit world. For the Thai, the presence and function

of spirits are profoundly influencing. Everywhere there are spirit houses; small shrines outside homes, offices, restaurants, and places of business; and amulets hanging in taxis, intended to appease the spirits.

But back to my question: after almost two centuries of evangelical missionary work, investments of thousands of lives and millions of dollars, out of a total population of 65 million, why are there only 370,000 evangelical Christians, or about 0.5 percent of the country?

Since these numbers seem discouraging, I asked Dr. Wiracha Kowae, then chair of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), why he was optimistic. He noted five important changes.

- First, foreigners no longer run the Thai church. As in China, he sees the church having three mandates: self-governing, self-propagating, and self-funding. While in China the Cultural Revolution regrettably repressed all religions, even so, the Christian church there became strong by the power and creative genius of its indigenous leadership to run its own affairs, drive its evangelistic outreach, and take responsibility for funding its own efforts.
- As many Thai have moved from rural areas to the cities, the old ways made rigid by a lack of education and loyalty to their religion have been shaken, opening minds to other views and sets of values.
- Pastor Paul Yonggi Cho from South Korea is credited with helping Thai Christians realize how much they were limiting what God could do. It became a wakeup call to pastors. For example, in the past, in planning for their church buildings, they hadn't included parking lots, as it never occurred to them that their members would own cars.
- Critical to growth is the need to cultivate a culture of generosity. "Without that, spiritual renewal is unlikely," Dr. Kowae said. Lacking generosity and little outward look for mission, churches remain moribund and listless. He noted that missions assumed that Thais didn't have much to give, and so

they weren't challenged and came to feel that because the Gospel was free, there was no need to give materially. Dr. Kowae linked giving to a vision for mission. Resting in the comfort of being recipients of the generosity of others created dependence and kept the Thais from learning the art and practice of the gift of generosity.

- A curious development has given Christians a more visible place in the eyes of government. As Muslims in Thailand grew, they increased their cultural demands. Killings by Islamists moved the government to be more supportive of Christians, who were no longer seen as a threat to the nation. For the Christian community to be more positively viewed by a majority Buddhist country helps to frame how Christians and their beliefs are understood.

The optimism of national church leadership is rooted in a reliance on indigenous leadership: national churches, colleges, seminaries, and missions led by Thais.

A Power for Living study found that Thais didn't find the words "Jesus" and "God" objectionable, which was one reason why some had assumed the gospel has had only a modest impact. They then invited people to make a phone call to receive a book, expecting that perhaps a couple hundred thousand would call; surprisingly, a few million did.

Thailand is a country to watch. Overshadowed by Buddhism and a culture that treats being Thai and Buddhist as one and the same, how will this current vision break through barriers that have so strongly bridled the Gospel?

Being led by its own people, funded increasingly by its members, and expanding by their own efforts is a challenging mission plan. But by implementing it, Thailand may see a breakout in vision and witness.

## **TODAY'S READING**

*I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn*



*of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies . . . You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty. You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall. As for God, his way is perfect; the world of the Lord is flawless. He is a shield, for all who take refuge in him.*

—Psalm 18:1–2, 25–30

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Let's offer thanks for the many who over the years have served faithfully in this land. Thailand's leadership is in the hands of its own people today. Pray that the Spirit will overshadow men and women who in prayer will not be fooled by cultural missteps but will be wise in grace and truth.
- Christian education is critical in all lands for the advance of the gospel. Thailand is a country of the young. Pray that universities, colleges, and places of training will be vibrant in spiritual aptitude and will equip graduates with a knowledge of the Lord and his Word and experience in serving Christ in the church and the marketplace.
- Every country is challenged to discover the

meeting place of culture and gospel. Pray for wise minds and sensitive hearts that can help national leaders and Christians understand how the life and Word of Jesus speaks into their language, culture, and life experience.

- The presence of the spirit world dominates this people. Pray for spiritual renewal, to set people free from bondage and help them find the liberty that only Christ brings.

## PRAYER

*Spirit of God, you bring the light of the truth of Jesus into our darkness. Your life-giving presence lifts us from our fears and releases us from cultural and spiritual containments. With this in mind, we pray for Thailand and its pastors, leaders, and king. We know the power of giving helps free us from ourselves, as we see others and their needs. For Thai Christians, may this important gift of generosity become active and life-giving. May the seed sown over these many years find ready soil in which your kingdom will grow and bring peace and life to this great land. Amen.*

# 25 TURKEY

## WHERE CHRISTIAN FAITH WAS ALMOST SNUFFED OUT

The historical role of Turkey has been enormous in shaping the church, both within its borders and in neighboring countries. The capital city, Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), was named after Constantine, the Roman Emperor who in 313 made Christianity Rome's official religion. The churches named in the book of Revelation are located in Turkey, along with other sites visited by Christian pilgrims and tourists.

Officially a secular state, its majority religion is Muslim. Even though the system has been declared secular, the government funds much of Islamic religious life.



**Location:** Turkey links two continents, Europe and Asia, with most of its land mass being in Asia. Bordered by many European and Asian countries, it sits on the north side of the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Black Seas, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus.

**Population:** 78 million

**Religion:** Muslim 99%; Christian 1%

### DISPATCH

A century ago, 25 percent of Turkey was Christian. Today it is less than 1 percent—and this in a country where the early church was planted. The apostle John's letters in Revelation were written to seven cities in what is now Turkey. In the last 100 years, not only were the ancient stems of Christian life cut off, but all its roots were almost torn up.

Walking the winding streets of Istanbul or riding the ferry from the Asian to European side, we recall that before the genocide of Armenian Christians and the takeover by Islam 100 years ago, this city and nation were prime centers of Christian presence. Today, an Islamic government with an odd kind of secularity is now a member of NATO. Under its president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, there is also movement to exert influence over the Middle East.

Turkey was the heart of the Ottoman Empire. In the late thirteenth century, its reach spanned the Mediterranean basin—southeast Europe, Western Asia, the Caucasus, and North Africa. This empire was intact until World War I, when

it was defeated and its lands were reduced to the current Turkish borders. The most infamous of Turkey's actions in the recent past was the genocide of 1.5 million Armenian Christians in the early 1900s.

Today, Turkey is in an empire revival mode, with emphasis on being Turkish and reestablishing their greatness as a people. Alongside this is an affirmation of Islam. Although it is officially a secular state, non-Muslims are viewed as infidels. A Christian businessperson said that even though he is on good terms with his colleagues, if he visits them in their homes, his eating plate goes through a different process of being washed because he is considered unclean. In business or a public-sector workplace, if one is known as a Christian, promotion is unlikely.

Still, there is a small and growing community of Christians in Turkey today, most of them newly converted evangelicals. The Armenian Orthodox, who lived through a horrific century of death yet retain their ethnic identity, are strengthening their presence and community.

Their churches, as well as the Roman Catholic ones, are all small and quite aberrant to Turkish nationalism.



| *Blue Mosque, Istanbul*

## MEET LEVENT

In 1985, there were an estimated thirty believers in Turkey who had converted from a Muslim background (known as Muslim Background Believers or MBBs). Today there are over 10,000. Levent Kinran, a church leader, is emblematic of the work of the Spirit. His parents' Muslim faith was at best nominal, and so as a teenager Levent looked elsewhere for a faith that made sense to him. Here is his story as he told it to me:

I came to know Jesus in 1987. I was seeking God, and since I was a Muslim, my first steps were to take Arabic classes, worship five times a day and try to become a better Muslim. However, as I was walking deeper in this direction, I began to question even the existence of God. I was feeling emptier and less fulfilled. At that time, I started reading a New Testament and was overwhelmed by Jesus Christ. His miracles, His teaching, His life and His love touched me very deeply. I realized with amazement that His authority and His claims about Himself were all true and that He was the Son of God!

When I discovered His endless love for me and His dying on the cross—because of his love—I seriously considered responding to His call. However, being in the Muslim

world, considering the call of Jesus is quite a challenge. There is a decree which commands that anyone who denounces Islam is to be killed. But the more I was convinced of Jesus Christ, the more aware I became that I could not live without His truth. As a result, I accepted Him as my Savior and my Lord. His love, His peace and His joy have been unlike anything I had known and are greater than any suffering.

Today, Levent is a leader in the Association of Protestant Churches of Turkey (here "Protestant" and "Evangelical" are interchangeable) and pastors the Anatolian Protestant Church of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship.

## HOW ARE CHRISTIANS FARING?

In a country with such a complex history and intersecting social, political and religious issues, the following may help our understanding.

- Turkey's declaration of being a secular state is curious. Although Turkey doesn't allow religious symbols in government, the minister of religious affairs pays salaries of imams and other costs of the Muslim faith, forcing Christians to finance Islamic mosques and enterprises through their taxes.
- The historical denial of the Armenian Christian genocide is legendary, although now there is an occasional public mention. Yet Armenians worldwide continue to grieve their loss as the government refuses to acknowledge its complicity.
- The government has turned one-third of public schools into Qur'anic schools. Thus Christians and others not wanting such intense Islamic education for their children either send them to private schools or submit.
- It is nearly impossible for a Christian congregation to get a permit to build a house of worship. This is important missiologically. In the Islamic world, not having a church building makes it difficult to sustain an ongoing public witness; it

creates confusion among Muslims as to a Christian's identity if he or she doesn't have a place of worship.

- During the Ottoman Empire, Turkey was a world power. While this was lost in the early twentieth century, nationalism still profoundly affects government planning, with Islam intertwined with its national identity. Indeed, to be a Turk, one is assumed to be a Muslim. To be otherwise is unpatriotic.
- There has been a slight increase in religious freedom following the killing of three Christians of the Zirve Publishing House. The trial gave advocates of religious rights increased opportunity to press their case for fair treatment. Also, international publicity is prodding the government to take note of the Christian community. The imprisonment of pastor Andrew Brunson for two years on trumped-up charges put the country and its religious laws and human-rights deficiencies on public display.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Certain factors provide opportunity for increased witness. Generations born after 1980 have grown up in a world of free elections, greater allowances to make their own choices, a shift from rural to urban living, and an explosive media. This generation comprises 60 percent of the population. They are better educated and not as aware of their past as their parents are. This makes them less rooted and more open to change. SAT-7, a Christian media ministry across the Middle East, was awarded a channel on a Turkish satellite, marking a possible major breakthrough in broadcasting.

Turkey's religious majority too often treats Christians harshly. Even so, just witnessing their joy in meeting together is deeply moving. On Sunday morning in church, I saw their uninhibited smiles and open displays of affection. I was awed by the sheer beauty of their fellowship and the telltale signs of love and

enthusiastic conversation. Their heartfelt thrill at being together with those joined by the love of Jesus was evident.

Turkey, a geo-strategic land bridge connecting Europe with Asia, is a place where many Christians are investing their lives as they seek a rebirth of the gospel witness. It matters that the gospel is again deeply rooted in this land of early apostolic activity.

## TODAY'S READING

*Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life. Rescue me from my enemies, Lord, for I hide myself in you. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.*

—Psalm 143:8–10

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Those of us who live in Christian-majority countries find it difficult to understand how Christians raise families, go to work, and move about in a society where one is not only part of a tiny minority, but often marginalized and oppressed. Today, let us set aside any complaints we might have, which are often small compared to those of Christians in Turkey, and pray for their needs.
- These needs include the right to register churches, so important in their testimony to Muslims. Pray that attempts by the Association of Protestant Churches would get a fair hearing from the government and be given the right to build their own churches.
- Children often have no option but to go to Muslim schools. Pray for the raising up of Christian schools.
- Many Christians are working in business as a base for both employment and witness. Pray that others will join them in building a critical mass to strengthen their worshipping community and to spread the good news of Christ.



## **PRAYER**

*Loving Savior, here in Turkey, this land in which your church was planted, the light of your witness almost expired. The scourge of persecution and genocide reduced your faithful to just a few. Yet we know, Spirit of God, that in such moments and places, your power is at work, giving strength and wisdom to those who love the gospel. Even though Christians are often treated unfairly, your Word continues to plant the seed of life. We pray for Christian leaders that they would continue to experience the joy of your presence and, in their study, grow deeper in faith. May the sweet savor of Christian love be evident in their witness, for the praise of Christ our Lord. Amen.*

# 24 VENEZUELA

## A COUNTRY ON THE EDGE

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was colonized by Spain in the 1500s, and in 1811 became one of the earliest colonies in the Spanish-America orbit to declare independence. It was ruled for decades by caudillos or military “strongmen,” but a number of democratically elected governments came to power starting in the late 1950s. In 1993, the president was impeached for embezzling public funds, and in 1998, military officer Hugo Chávez was elected, under the banner of the “Bolivarian Revolution.” He died of cancer in 2013. Venezuela has the world’s largest oil reserves.



**Location:** on the northern coast of South America, surrounded by Guyana, Brazil and Colombia

**Population:** 30 million

**Religion:** Christian 85% (includes Roman Catholic 50%, Evangelical/Protestant 31%); Nonreligious 12%

### DISPATCH

I sat looking into the brown eyes of a beautiful twenty-one-year-old university student, Sairam. Her face was framed by dark long hair; she folded her hands and quietly said in English, “Dr. Brian, we are sitting on a time bomb.”

She had just spent six months in Helicoide Prison for public protest against her government, where this fourth-year student was squeezed into a small cell with five other students. Because there were only two small cots, they had to take turns sleeping.

Venezuela, a beautiful country with natural resources of enormous magnitude, teeters on the verge of collapse. The yo-yo effect of its huge oil reserves has contributed to a series of bizarre social and economic experiments that could push the country over the edge. In the government's anxiety to control, its Marxist-minded political establishment has made it into something akin to a police state. I was told that when I preached in churches and spoke in various social forums and interviews, I would be observed. Who was I? Why was I here? What

harm might I do? These and other questions were being asked.

The wearing edges of this failing social experiment are evident: garbage not being picked up; police interspersed along the streets, stopping drivers to look in cars for no reason other than control and intimidation. As we arrived, its currency was devalued by 300 percent. There were four-hour lineups for food basics. And in a strange twist of economic sense, gas for cars was one-half a cent per liter—four cents a gallon.

Venezuela has a 500-year history of European and more recently indigenous dictatorial control. In 1999, President Chávez inherited a country wobbling on an uneven platform of social and economic inequities. His promise to bridge the rich/poor divide and reduce corruption secured his engine of political control, which in time he drove off the track. Some promises he could keep, as long as oil was floating over a \$100 a barrel. When that collapsed, it undercut his government's ability to fulfill its promises.

Major crises are at hand. It's a perfect storm blowing on this South American people. As I met with economists, working people, professors, pastors, and politicians, I learned more about these crises.

The charismatic Chávez with his ideas and presence marginalized public institutions and their independence. By the time he died, they had been so eroded that civic powers such as the judiciary were under the thumb of political masters. Stories abound of justices penning decisions with the muscle of the military at their side.

Hour-long lines for bread and milk indicate that something is fundamentally wrong. The gyrations of world oil prices has tumbled the country's economy on its nose. What is not known is what backlash civil strife might bring. It is feared that this may be a natural outcome as the poor get shoved further out of line by the powerful.

The poor, lining up behind the government, believed that what Chávez and his political inheritors said was true and would be done. The



| Caracas church in worship

people had had a history of quasi-slavery, as their previous economic masters had kept them in poverty. Expectations rose, and for a time they were partially met. Refrigerators and washing machines were delivered as part of that promise. But when parts were needed, the shelves were bare. Countless billions passed hands, providing relief for some, and a measure of economic help. Now that's gone. The country is bankrupt without a chance of even servicing the debt.

The cultural web has been woven with a

mantra that says, "Depend on the state." With this underlying political philosophy, industries were taken over and now most are in tatters. Newspapers, television stations, magazines and radio companies have been bought out by those who favor the government. Now, with no voice to help offset official propaganda, the social fabric is not only coming undone, it's dissolving.

Venezuela is looking over the edge into a kind of out of control country, being catapulted from its moorings into the unknown. Each year there are more than 20,000 assassinations and killings. The number of kidnappings is unknown, and corruption is off the scale. Even the international study group Transparency International says it is no longer possible to measure Venezuela's level of corruption. Layer upon layer, violence and corruption, handmaidens of the powerful, rule. While these factors exist in various degrees in many countries, here corruption has become statecraft.

## STORIES OF FAITH

Yet here in the center of pending collapse is a common thread of faith, weaving its own mosaic. It is strong, joyful in witness, doing works of grace and kindness, wrestling with how faith intersects with political control, investing in the hearts and minds of its people. Let's visit two moments and places.

In the heart of Caracas, on the edge of a very poor area of its capital city, I walked from the platform to sit in the front row with the congregation, alongside Sam Olson, native son, longtime colleague, and pastor. Fifteen hundred had gathered for the third morning service. A choir lively in Latin rhythm was carried by a twelve-member band—three trombones, three saxes, two drummers, three keyboards, and a trumpeter from Cuba. Their mix of lilting Latin melodies was punctuated by jazz interludes as a horn or sax picked up the melody in a cadence of soulful peace. Preaching that morning, I was lifted in spirit by the warmth and enthusiasm of the people, something a preacher experiences only occasionally. Sunday night, in a much

smaller church, there was the same sense of joy and trust. This was the first moment.

The second was on Monday morning, meeting with people from the Christian Network for Social Interaction (CRIS). Their vision and purpose? To engage their crumbling world with a rebirth of social, economic and political life and integrity. I asked for a quick bio: they are a mix of economists, professors, politicians, engineers, pastors, reporters, and lawyers. I spoke about the call of Christians to engage the public square, and then I took questions: how to be a Christian in the various spheres? When to object? When to give in? I watched and listened to their honesty and fears, knowing they realized they were close to a precipice. Would some of these leave as thousands of their fellow citizens had done?

I have met few groups in such calamitous moments who, driven by concern and informed by their Christian faith, are searching so diligently for ways to work with a community in which they purpose to live out their faith.

Sairam is not a believer. When I asked if I could pray for her and her colleague, she smiled and said she wanted that. I asked if she had felt Christ's presence in prison, but such talk and the very idea of spiritual presence seemed foreign. But she did know that she had been visited in jail by a Christian who wanted to make sure she had water and food.

Venezuela's turbulent world rides a roller coaster of bizarre national and economic governmental choices and maneuvers. But today and tomorrow, I will pray for Christians in this creative mix of Latin Americans. They too want a place of freedom where they can live and raise their children and be proud of the country of their birth or choice.

## TODAY'S READING

*The Lord is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does. The Lord is near to all who call on him,*

*to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them...My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.*

—Psalm 145:17-21

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- The people of Venezuela have experienced such ups and downs of leadership and national well-being. Pray for the church leaders as they guide their people through days of difficulty.
- Pray also for the political leadership, whoever is in control, that they would refuse the option of corruption and civil strife, instead giving the people honest and fair rule.
- Pray for Christians who are trying to bring the salt and light of Christ into civil society. May they be wise and gracious, strong and loving—ever giving evidence of the Christ who as servant taught us all how to lead.

## PRAYER

*Father, we pray on behalf of all Venezuelans, for their safety, protection from civil strife, and economic health and spiritual life. As this Latin American country rides the ups and downs of political intrigue and molestation, Father, bring into leadership those with a heart to care for their people, and give them wisdom on how to do it, politically and economically. Anoint church leaders and ministry colleagues as they seek to lead the people of God with courage, ever providing strength to those called by your name. May this land soon resound with freedom and opportunity for the gospel to affect all of life, ever giving evidence of the Jesus of Nazareth whose life we now claim. In his name, Amen.*



# 25

## KENYA

### A CANARY IN A MINE SHAFT

Kenya is a Canadian prairie boy's dream. The wide sweeping savannah grasslands of the Serengeti coming up from Tanzania in the south give the eye a horizon-to-horizon view.

A gem of its British colonial masters, in the 1950s nationals rose in revolution, and in 1963 Kenya was given her independence.

As in any postcolonial period, the political and social road has been bumpy. The search for a multi-party democracy is hard to find in a country resting on centuries of tribal rule.

Christian faith is the religious majority. There is a strong Christian educational, medical, and mission community that serves as a pilot for many agencies throughout Africa.



**Location:** Northeastern Africa, on the Indian Ocean and bordering Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia

**Population:** 40 million

**Religion:** Christian 85% (including Evangelical/Protestant 54%, Roman Catholic 21%, Anglican 9%); Muslim 8%; Ethno-religionist 7%

### DISPATCH

I grew up knowing more about Kenya than any other country. When my friend George Macquarie and his family moved to Kenya, many letters followed him to his boarding school, Rift Valley Academy. In the 1950s, our home in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan became a missionary hostel and for us a marvelous means of learning about the world.

Like so many African countries, Kenya struggled out from under colonial rule, with the Mau uprising leading to independence in 1963. I followed this story, learning the names of cities, villages, regions, political leaders, and combatants.

Late in the nineteenth century, the Christian story came to eastern Africa by way of both Catholics and Protestants. As Kenya was brought to world attention through British colonial rule, missions from the United Kingdom and North America followed, building on the presence and

organization created by the colonizers. In turn, missionaries opened the people to the rule of English-speaking whites.

Today, Kenya is predominately Christian in its faith. It is also among those African nations facing a serious influx of Islam.

Here the majority church is a collection of evangelicals, making up 48 percent of the population. The church influence is enormous, with some 77,000 Christian congregations. The Evangelical Fellowship estimates that within their alliance there are 40,000 congregations, 10,000 schools, and 500 hospitals and clinics, all founded and run by their churches and missions. Even so, Kenya's elections are marred by controversy. Its reputation for corruption at the highest levels of government is disturbing.

Kenya, rich and diverse in people and resources, is a land of remarkable beauty and of great importance to the presence and influence of Christian faith throughout the continent. The

emerging presence of Islam is no secret. As it pushes its way down from the north, sub-Saharan countries are feeling the infiltration of its culture, laws, and mosques.

## UNREST ON ITS BORDERS

The Somalian civil unrest brews relentlessly on Kenya's northeast border. Tens of thousands of Somalians have migrated south, including Islamic missionaries, funded by Islamic states rich in oil money. They strategically educate their brightest and find opportunity for them to rise in positions of influence, especially in the public sector, seeding Islamic faith into the country's future.

In 2014 the Kenyan government passed a law defining marriage, allowing Muslims to retain polygamy. Some see this as a foot in the door for Sharia law.

The dilemma facing Christians is this: the gospel opens society to other faiths, giving them the right to preach and freely make religious choices. We want others to enjoy this religious freedom even as we expect countries to allow us ours. However, in countries where Christian faith is not the majority, that often is not true.

So I asked: does it matter to Africa that Kenya—a country shaped by a strong Christian heritage—retain its Christian influence in society? I heard a "yes" whenever the question was asked. Kenyans know Africans are intuitively sensitive and open to spiritual faith. Inevitably, some religious faith will fill its life.

I then asked, "Did it matter culturally to the rest of Africa that in time Islam might become the dominant religion in Kenya, forming the culture as it does in other Islamic-dominant African countries?"

Kenya's evangelical community historically has focused on evangelism, education, and medical care and is not as inclined to influence government and public-square interests even though Daniel arap Moi, an evangelical, served as president from 1978 to 2002. Today there is a voice of concern: if Christians don't influence public ideas and institutions, others will.

Kenya is a canary in a mineshaft. That is not to say that Christians in government automatically solve corruption. Nor that justice and fairness always flow from Christians being in leadership. However, the call of the Gospel—to love your neighbor, to even love your enemy—nurtures justice that can flower into national life.

Kenya's many Christians are challenged to widen their influence so that in decades to come, this critically located African nation will provide a strong Christian presence throughout Africa. By so doing, they will help to protect African freedom, allowing its millions of people to worship and live in faith.

## TODAY'S READING

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust." Surely he will save you from*



Senior church leaders

*the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*

—Psalm 91:1-4

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Amidst the many denominations, agencies, congregations, and leaders in Kenya, pray that grace will link them together in prayer and unity.
- The nation of Kenya is strategic for Africa, and its people's strength in gospel witness

has consequences for many. Pray for strong leadership that they will provide godly counsel and guidance in building a strong nation.

- Kenya, large and historic, is an influencer. Pray that there will be a strong missional movement, sending Kenyans out into their region and globally.
- Christians have significant presence in the country. Pray that their vision will include the call to justice in caring for the most vulnerable. Pray that materialism, the most seductive of gods, will not become the default of this strong Christian community, but that faithfulness to the gospel will prevail.

## **PRAYER**

*Gracious Father, in Kenya, this varied and populous land of northeast Africa, a country which has heard and known of your Son for generations, we praise you for the work being done in your name. Even in the middle of conflict and tribal strife, we pray today for your people that they will continue to move forward in your name, making known your love and goodness. We know that the influence of this land and its people is enormous in their region. May their skills and talents be used to construct a nation which will preserve freedom of faith and stand as model to the world of righteousness. Amen.*

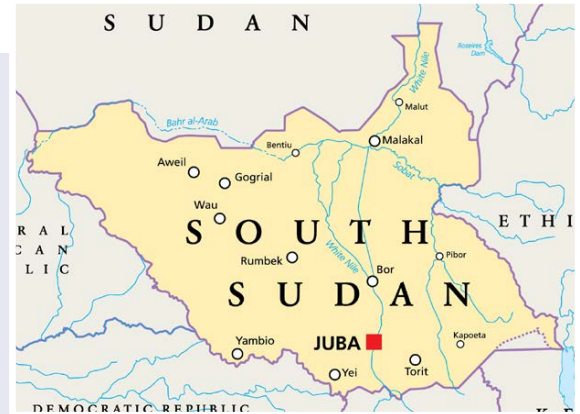
# 26 SOUTH SUDAN

## TURNING SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES

South Sudan is mainly agricultural-based, and most people live at a subsistence level. Its civil wars have destroyed so much; there is little infrastructure, passable roads hardly exist, and most of its daily necessities are imported from neighboring countries.

Before July 2012, Sudan was Africa's largest country. As the nation struggled to rule its sharply divided Arab and Muslim majority (mostly living in the north) and blacks and Christians (mostly living in the south), more than 2.5 million were killed in two civil wars.

In a referendum in the south, an overwhelming number voted to separate. South Sudan now is a distinct country with many of its historical issues continuing to vex both sides.



**Location:** located inland in northeastern Africa. To its north is its nemesis, Sudan; to the southeast are Kenya and Uganda, with the Congo and Central African Republic on the west and southwest. Vital to its history and economy is the Sudd, an enormous swampland linked to the Nile (White) River system.

**Population:** 8 million (estimated; numbers hard to verify)

**Religion:** Christian majority (Roman Catholics 2.5 million; Anglicans 2 million; Protestant/Evangelical 1 million), some Muslims and animists

### DISPATCH

The problem in South Sudan wasn't that Muslims were killing Christians or Christians killing Muslims; it was Christians killing Christians.

Even as border disputes continue between Sudan and the new Republic of South Sudan, even more troubling to this new and fragile African nation are the intertribal killings and child kidnappings.

What surprised the Christian community was the hostility that escalated into killing between tribes, primarily in the state of Jongeli. Triggering these killings was an age-old problem: cattle rustling. It is estimated that 3,000 South Sudanese died in two years from this internal conflict.

The nomadic tribes are rooted in centuries-old and culturally ingrained habits and resentments. Cattle define life and measure their

worth. This fact finds its way into the most central custom of tribal life, which is marriage. Important in this cultural ritual is the dowry question: what will my daughter fetch? Thus the dowry becomes an arbitrator of social well-being.

### THE DOWRY

The power of the dowry is extraordinary. The value of a daughter to be married is based on various factors: her characteristics—for some tribes, taller means more elegant and therefore more valuable—and the ability of the groom's family to pay. When South Sudan President Kiir's daughter married an Ethiopian, her family received a dowry of 300 cattle. The average family may have 25 cows.

Translate that into an annual income and its value is enormous. Although no money



changes hands and the dowry can be paid over time, getting your hands on new cattle is a prime matter, especially among young men wanting to build up their father's herd, preparing for marriage and assembling a dowry. Also, cattle rustling can enhance a young man's rite of passage; looting another tribe's herd helps demonstrate his manhood. Linked to robbing and its retributive action of killing is child kidnapping. Children who are kidnapped become slaves, herding and protecting cattle.

The South Sudan Evangelical Alliance called together tribal chiefs, elders, government



Executive committee of Evangelical Alliance of South Sudan

officials, and pastors to the Jongeli Peace and Reconciliation Conference hosted by the World Evangelical Alliance and Tear Fund, New Zealand. None disagreed that peace was better for all. They affirmed Christ's call to love your enemy. Commitment to these values was loud and instant, even though many attending were nominal in their faith. Practical answers were less clear. Like many African countries, South Sudan's infrastructure is under-resourced, caught in centuries of tribal identity and ingrained attitudes, and deeply entrenched in its mores and expectations.

I listened to their stories, felt their sorrow, noted their analysis, and wondered as to solutions. While the nation is fragile and new in its government, leadership is key to finding resurrection-like initiatives.

## WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

Missions have been active here in Sudan for years. In the 1800s, Christian missions, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, were strong in the south. Today, while many practice tribal religions, Christian faith is accepted as the common point in securing peace.

Outside help is needed here to lift communities and to develop a promised future for their children. Big ideas such as infrastructure require major input from others. Health, education, creative training in agriculture, and husbandry are on the top of a to-do list—tough and daunting enough to stretch big-thinking philanthropists. Heroic efforts of church and ministry agencies, spotted about the countryside, are powerful testimonies to what can be done. Surely more of this is needed. The culture is respondent to Christian initiatives. They understand faith language, but the ingrained culture and collective memories are hard to crack. Whereas in some countries, governments put in place policies to keep Christian agencies out, South Sudan is open and willing. No visas required.

There is a *however*, however: their soil of development will lie barren until they themselves sufficiently want change and transformation. Finding ways to bring about peace is a formidable task for all: tribal leaders, NGOs, church, and political leaders.

Investment boards of companies, strategy committees of mission agencies, and men and women looking for a place to make a difference may want to consider South Sudan. These people, generally handsome, tall, and dignified, are old in civilization and desperate to find their way. Making up the newest nation on planet Earth, they need our attention if they are to remake swords into plowshares.

## TODAY'S READING

*Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. May your deeds be shown to your*

*servants, your splendor to their children. May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands. —Psalm 90:15–17*

### **ITEMS FOR PRAYER**

- Missions offering various skills are so needed in South Sudan. Pray for those already on the ground, that they may be protected from civil wars and have sufficient resources to fulfill their calling.
- Being such a young nation, its need for infrastructure is critical. Pray that giving countries will be creatively wise and invest carefully but generously, so that this people will rise from their current state.
- While the country is understood to be Christian, it is largely a nominal faith and its people are in need of our transforming Christ. Pray for its pastors and those in teaching roles, that the gospel story will be

played out in their lives.

- The government, fragile as it is, matters to the people. Pray for wise and honest leadership.

### **PRAYER**

*Gracious God, creator of this people and its many tribes, you have walked these centuries down their paths. In this new political state, dear Lord, visit this land of South Sudan with a double-edged sword of spiritual harvest and economic well-being. Their heart is inclined to you, yet many are without knowledge of you. Burst in on this people so they may know grace and learn to live in your presence. May that collective experience translate into the growing of a nation that is good to its people, fair to its neighbors, and alive and well in you, our Lord. Amen.*

# 27 GREECE

## FEW COUNTRIES ARE MORE "CHRISTIAN" THAN GREECE

Regarded as the birthplace of Western civilization, Greece experimented early with the idea of democracy. Here the Olympic Games were founded, and formulations of philosophy were birthed that would greatly influence the West. While the Roman Empire carried the Hellenistic (Greek) culture to the world, the ideas shaping the world 2,000 years ago can be traced back to this people.

During the twentieth century, Greece has struggled within the European world, experiencing wars with Turkey and Italy and a stint under Communism. In recent years, they've been plagued by financial distress.

Most Greeks claim Christian affiliation in this country dominated by the Greek Orthodox Church. It was early influenced by the apostle Paul and first-century Christianity.

### DISPATCH

Not only is Greece Christian, but it can be difficult to navigate socially if one isn't Greek Orthodox. A professor, who is a publicly admitted Communist, said, "Of course, we are all Christian. You can hardly register a child unless baptized by the state church. I'm an atheist but I'd be a fool not to be a Christian too." A Christian leader, in conversation, happened to say he was evangelical. The other turned in surprise and exclaimed with puzzlement, "But I thought you were Greek!" Being both Greek and Orthodox, one is linked by the umbilical cord of history, tradition, and birth.

Countries in eastern and southern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa have historically been shaped by Christian Orthodox Churches whose people make up a 300 million worldwide, Christian groupings not under Rome.

### A NOTE ON EASTERN ORTHODOXY

Christians in the early centuries fought bitterly



**Location:** a peninsula in southeast Europe on the Ionian, Mediterranean, and Aegean Seas

**Population:** 12 million

**Religion:** Christian 92% (primarily Greek Orthodox); Evangelical 30,000

over which church would dominate: Eastern churches, centered in Istanbul (Constantinople), or Western churches, centered in Rome. The Eastern churches refused to acknowledge Rome and rallied around a national or regional church. They had similar theology to Rome but refused to submit to a Roman bishop or pope. The Orthodox churches include Coptic (Egypt), Ethiopian, Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Syrian, Antiochian, Czech, Ukrainian, Armenian, Melkite, and Maronite Orthodox. They established their own churches with their own archbishops, giving tacit approval to the seniority of the patriarch of Istanbul. Some, such as the Coptic Church in Egypt, even have their own pope.

### THE EARLY CHURCH

Greeks proudly declare, and rightly so, their early role in the worldwide church. The marvelous archaeological digs give evidence of this country's place in the founding of the Christian faith. A quick read of the book of Acts



(chapters 16–18) describes those early days. The church grew not only by evangelism but also by force. The Roman Emperor Theodosius pressed Christianity on his citizens. In the year 387, he announced chariot races in Thessaloniki, north of Athens. Once 7,000 had assembled, he sent in his soldiers, and all were slaughtered. Athenians, knowing he was on his way south in a matter of days, rushed to the sea and were baptized, demonstrating to the emperor their newly found faith.

Early in its history, Greece became solidly Christian, by conviction, fear or accommodation,



■ On Mars Hill, Athens

and today the Greek Orthodox Church remains a prime shaper of Greek life and politics.

Evangelicals recognize their minority status. They know that the majority faith can marginalize their witness whenever they choose. And further, there are social levers they can access to press civic authority and police to reduce religious opportunity.

Evangelical witness operates with the hope that their witness of Christ will nurture within the Orthodox a deeper appreciation and love for Christ. In a country that claims to be Christian, their devotion and theology rests on understanding Jesus as infant, the Christ-child and Mary as dominant. Most evangelicals admit their goal isn't so much to win over Orthodox

but to inspire faith and spiritual renewal within the church and then to build a strong and credible evangelical presence by way of churches and missions.

Also, many feel that Western missions have overlooked Greece, assuming it is not in need of mission enterprises by Christians of other countries.

## PROSELYTISM

The Greek constitution declares that it is a crime to proselytize. When Greece entered the European Union, they were required to abandon this clause, yet the government prefers to pay fines when utilizing such a law rather than change it. One can appeal to the European court if religious rights have been violated, but costs to do so are prohibitive. In effect, the continuing application of the old law has a dampening effect on Christian witness.

In a strange twist of language, the government uses an English word for evangelicals, calling them "Protestants" and refusing to use the Greek word *Dimartyria*, which carries with it an implication of being a martyr. The use of the English term "Protestant" suggests that evangelicals are foreigners.

The evangelical community began in the early twentieth century, due in part to the fall of the Ottoman Empire. This Muslim empire, centered in Turkey, had dominated Greece for 400 years, ruling much of southeast Europe right up to the gates of Vienna. When the Ottoman Turks were defeated in WWI, Greeks living in Turkey were released to return to Greece. Many who had been living in Turkey prior to the war had been influenced by evangelicals. When they returned to Greece, they kept alive their heritage and built churches, especially in the north around Thessaloniki.

Greece, a country rooted in the apostle Paul's missionary witness, is made up of a people who mostly identify as Christian. Yet this land is in need of spiritual renewal and the personal, transforming presence of Christ.



## TODAY'S READING

*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.*  
—1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- In a country where Christian history dots the landscape and where symbols of faith are so visible, pray for increased freedom for public witness of the gospel.
  - Pastoral leadership in Greece is in constant demand. Pray for the Greek Bible College and other places of training in their work of preparing pastors and Christian leaders.
  - Financial strain creates difficulties for the government and its people. Pray for Greece's financial well-being and for missions and churches.
- Because Greece is a refugee highway for many attempting to enter Europe, pray for ministries that bring food, clothing, and spiritual assistance to those living in bleak and trying circumstances.

## PRAYER

*Lord Jesus, for this people so early acquainted with your gospel, we pray for a revival of Christ-lifting presence within the hearts of the Greek people. As they wrestle with issues of finances, government stability, and the surge of tens of thousands of refugees, may they recognize that the message the apostle Paul brought so many years ago is as current and powerful today as it was then. By your Spirit, break in on their national consciousness so that in hearing your voice they will echo with Paul, "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). Amen.*

# 28 BURMA/ MYANMAR

AS WISE AS  
SERPENTS AND  
HARMLESS AS DOVES

Burma, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, is made up of eight major national races and 135 subgroups or tribes. Among its 116 languages, 26 have some Bible translation.

The cultural complexity and ongoing killings and conflicts come from ethnic tensions and divisions. Especially troubling has been the issue with the largely Muslim ethnic Rohingya minority in the north.

Conquered by the British in the 1800s, in 1948 Burma became independent. Six months before independence, General Aung San, who led the struggle against the British, was murdered. (He was the father of Nobel Peace awardee Aung San Suu Kyi.) After an interlude of Communist control and opposition forces, in 1962 there was a military coup, and the junta ruled until 2011. Then the military government declared democratization.



**Location:** in Southeast Asia, surrounded by Laos, Thailand, China, Bangladesh, and India

**Population:** 60 million

**Religion:** Buddhist 80%; Christian 9% (Evangelical/Protestant 7%, Roman Catholic 1%); Muslim 7%

## DISPATCH

Christian leaders here understand well Jesus' advice to be "as wise as serpents and harmless as doves." In a country best known as Burma, its citizens have survived fifty years of brutal military dictatorship. Explaining how they emerged intact, one pastor noted, "We didn't put signs on our buildings. When we wanted to build a church, we just built a house and made it larger. We kept our heads down."

## A LITTLE HISTORY MATTERS.

After a century of British colonial rule ended in 1948, Burma was given independence. Some saw it as doomed from the start. Astrological readers interpreted that independence had occurred on the wrong day. Here, reading astrological signs is so important that

government and business decisions will only be made when the Buddhist priest reading the astrological signs gives his okay. Even when building bridges.

During their drive to be freed from colonial rule, tribal antagonism was triggered when non-Burmese ethnic nationalities such as the Karen, Chin, and Rohingya sided with the British. Some were not Buddhists and were seen as traitors to the nation and its religion, especially the Karen tribe.

Burma's recent military regimes are seen as one of the most repressive in recent history. They have a record of crimes against humanity, torture, forced labor and conscription of child soldiers. Much of the world community pressured the Myanmar military to stop the abuse of human rights. Driven by the defiance

of one of its daughters, Aung San Suu Kyi, they finally announced that democracy would become the ruling system. However, she too faced criticism over the government's failure to protect the Muslim minority of the Rohingya. Aung San Suu Kyi is now imprisoned.

A few years later, changes in the country



| *Worship in Myanmar*

are mixed. Some are cosmetic, as the new constitution requires that 40 percent of elected members be military, 40 percent former military and 20 percent civilian.

## HOW IS THE CHURCH IN MYANMAR FARING?

- Their ability to keep a low profile may seem to some a kowtowing to the military. Historians will give us a broader picture, but my sense is that their strategy of living out the gospel in ways that don't draw attention from the military is wise. This allows space in which churches and missions can survive.
- Their churches tend to be located in rural areas. The land is dotted with many small Bible colleges, everyone seemingly in need of their own school, reminiscent of other countries freed from military rule and dictatorships. As freedom becomes the

new norm, learning to cooperate is a skill its leaders need to acquire.

- Leaders in Myanmar's churches and mission agencies are young, emerging with new freedoms under a new political mandate. These people are able and energetic, which bodes well for the future of the church.
- The gospel witness faces distinct challenges in this Buddhist country. In contrast to Thailand, here Buddhism is more traditional than pervasive. In Thailand, spirit houses are everywhere: in front of hotels, restaurants, homes, places of business. Amulets are hung from mirrors in taxis and sold in the open markets. In Myanmar, while temples are everywhere and are used by citizens in their religious life, the religion is more cultural than personal, more traditional than operational. Moreover, there is a curious pattern of addressing spirituality. Education dominates life up to age thirty, with the next twenty years focused on vocation and money. At fifty, spiritual matters are taken more seriously. This makes evangelism among young people crucial.
- The language of Buddhism is Bali Sanskrit, a rather distant tongue unknown by most citizens. Although it is memorized, it is not understood, and so for young people their religion becomes even more detached.
- The enormous tragedy of some 800,000 Muslim ethnic Rohingya in the north is an historic failure by the country's ruling elites to provide protection from nationalism, in their distinct move to eliminate this Muslim minority, which has been driven back into Bangladesh. It matters that Christians take up the cause of protecting those under persecution.

Burma/Myanmar, known from the movie *The Bridge over the River Kwai*, is in a new moment of cultural transition. While moving toward a more democratic country, it still is very much controlled by its large army of 400,000. As well, there remains an unresolved issue of

war refugees in Thailand, accompanied by an unresolved request for a commission of inquiry into possible war crimes.

The church has learned to hold its opinions to itself, keep its profile low, and understate its place and role. Its future will require diligence, humility, and the ability to be circumspect in witness and life. This is a great people who have known indescribable hardships; the Christians here have lived under a cruel government while maintaining a strong belief in the power of the gospel to bring personal and societal change. We prayed with its leadership, sensing great hope for its future.

### TODAY'S READING

*O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him." But you are a shield around me, O Lord; you bestow glory on me and life up my head. To the Lord I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side. Arise O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessings be on your people.*

—Psalm 3

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- In countries enjoying newly emerging freedoms, there is often the inclination for Christians to go it on their own, without regard for others. Pray for Burma/Myanmar that leaders will see the importance of fellowship and cooperation in unity for a

public witness of Christ and for strength of their common commitment.

- The persecution of the Rohingya in the north calls for Christians who will stand for their protection. Pray that Christians will be courageous in coming to their aid.
- Praise God for the move of his Spirit. As the church grows, its need for trained pastoral leadership is critical. Pray for these small and struggling schools, for their leadership and for the required resources so needed.
- Within the strong Buddhist community, especially among its 700,000 monks, pray that the presence of Christ will infiltrate their leadership. Pray that many will come to Christ and be transformed by his presence.

### PRAYER

*Dear Father, creator of all that is good, I give thanks for those in Myanmar who, through the tough times of persecution, have emerged as faithful to you. Today, as some Christians face ethnic persecution, be at work among them. Give leaders boldness, humility, and a spirit of servanthood. For its political leadership, may their move toward democracy be more than window dressing. May the freedoms they have promised become reality. And in the midst of its rise in standard of living, I pray that the church will defend the Rohingya in the north. May the church in this land become strong and viable, one that gives face, hands, and heart to their world of the Christ we love and represent. Amen.*



# 29 NEPAL

## A VIEW FROM THE TOP OF THE WORLD

With over 100 ethnic groups, Nepal is dominated by a caste system that is endemic within its Hindu population. Ruled by a monarchy and historically isolated from the world, it has experienced no colonial masters. In 1962, the king took over direct power. Through the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, there was much unrest until Maoist rebels claimed power in 2008. Finally, a political formula was agreed on, and in 2014 a constituent assembly was formed with an elected prime minister.



**Location:** This "top-of-the-world" mountainous country lies in Asia, on the southern slopes of the Himalayan Mountains, surrounded by China on the north and India on the south.

**Population:** 30 million

**Religion:** Hindu 80%; Buddhist 16%; Christian 3%; many identify as syncretistic, mixing Hinduism and Buddhism

### DISPATCH

For many, Mount Everest and Hindu temples are the faces of Nepal. But peer behind that façade and you'll see another reality. In 1960, there were 30 known Christians; today there close to one 2 million. How did it come about? "Quite simply," I was told. The story of Christian growth in Nepal describes the power of indigenous (local) leadership and witness.

Christian faith rose within its own Nepalese culture. Isolated from other cultures, most foreign missions weren't allowed in, although Bible societies had translated the Bible in the 1930s. The Hindu kingdom allowed only missions that were working in health and education but refused permission to evangelize or build churches. Their witness had to be by the testimony of their lives.

After 1960, people began to convert to Christianity. Both India and Britain had recruited Nepalese to fight (including the famous Sherpa from eastern Nepal) in their respective armies. Many of them heard the gospel and came to faith. Returning to their families and villages, they told about the Jesus they had met, and soon churches flourished.

Because Nepal had little available university training, most who wanted further education went elsewhere. Again, as with the soldiers, students contacted Christians in countries of study. After graduating, they too returned home and told their families and friends about Christ, and more churches were built.

In this country of 30 million, isolated from other cultural influences, a New Testament phenomenon was at work. When I asked if there was something within their life experience that triggered so many conversions, I learned about two vital factors: physical healings and deliverance from the control of evil. Hidden in valleys behind mountain peaks, people are cut off from medical help. When they were sick, they had only two choices—a witch doctor or Jesus. The former would add cost and bring no solution, while the second promised healing along with spiritual transformation for the person and community. The witness made visible by healings reverberated through families, villages and tribes, and many confessed Christ.

I wondered what obvious impact the gospel has had on the people of Nepal. Six factors surfaced:

- People stop worshipping idols.
- Love becomes an obvious expression of relationship. In a family-structured society, love triggering concrete patterns of caring makes the value of this newfound faith manifestly obvious.
- Hard work. Asking why this was a factor, I learned that not having to work is considered a blessing: you have been cursed by work because your “karma” or fate is bad. In contrast, the Christians taught that work is a direct gift from their heavenly Father.
- The gospel disregards the caste system, which degrades untouchables or Dalits. New converts of any class or distinction can freely enter a church and eat alongside other Christians, knowing that they too are beloved.
- Patterns of honesty and forgiveness become normative. Following the Maoist decade of killing and destruction (1996–2006) in which over 18,000 were killed, the government promised a truth and reconciliation commission. Years later, it still hasn't been implemented. When asked why, an official said, “Forgiveness is not part of our tradition. Without that understanding, such a commission is useless.”
- Conversion to Christ brings economic change. Their many religious festivals require money to participate. The poor are often forced to borrow from landlords and friends. Once Christian, they no longer attend, eliminating that outlay of funds. Also, when a witch doctor was consulted, he might have told his client to do more at a festival, which again required money. Christians were taught not to gamble or consume alcohol; with their budget freed from those costs, they had more money for food, education and health.

A professor said, “I tell government leaders that the best way to improve the economic well-being of Nepal is to promote Christian faith. Christians work harder and save more. Women are well treated, and the national social well-being goes up. Christians make great citizens.”

In this country on top of the world, there is a marvelous example of how Christians live out their faith: an unashamed witness, a heart to care for handicapped and marginalized, and a determination to be present in the political system, affirming human rights and freedom of worship. The apostle Paul would have enjoyed writing a letter to this church.



■ *The city after an earthquake*

### **TODAY'S READING**

*Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer. . . . In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer right sacrifices and trust in the lord. Many are asking, “Who can show us any good?” Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord. You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.*

—Psalm 4

## ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- Recognizing the remarkable witness of Christians in Nepal, praise God for his working in this land and its people.
- The freedom granted to people of faith to live and give witness is important in the building of churches and establishing of missions. Pray for the emergence of church leaders who will be characterized by peace and servanthood in their witness and outreach.
- Nepal's population includes an incredibly large percentage of young people. The need for economic growth and employment opportunities matters. Pray for Nepal as it builds a business sector.
- As a Hindu-dominated country, Nepal struggles with maintaining religious freedom. Christians still experience difficulties, even though the law guarantees their freedom. Pray for Christians, especially those in public leadership, that they will be wise in their witness to Christ.

## PRAYER

*Dear Lord, I give praise for the ways in which your Spirit has enabled the church in Nepal to grow. Help us learn the lessons of mission and ministry in a place so isolated. May their story be told to encourage nationals in other countries where they too feel left alone. Your Spirit is ever present in all lands of your creation. I pray that you would call up from Nepal's young population able men and women who love you, who are filled with the Spirit and made wise by their experience and education. As they serve and lead, may the name of Jesus be regarded as trustworthy so that many will come to know you, whom to know is life eternal. Amen.*



# 30 BANGLADESH

## A YOUNG COUNTRY WITH ANCIENT NEEDS

Bangladesh, while ancient in culture, has a recent history as a country. Prior to 1947, it was a part of India. When India became independent from colonial England, what we now call Bangladesh became part of Pakistan, then named East Pakistan (even though distanced from West Pakistan by 1,400 kilometers). Disaster was written all over this arrangement, and after a fierce war in which some three million died, in 1971 it became independent and was renamed Bangladesh. While it began as a secular state, in 1988 Islam became the official religion.

The country's location makes it vulnerable to floods that wash down the mountains, swelling its many rivers and flowing into the Bay of Bengal. With a dense population of 170 million, Bangladesh is pressed into a land mass about the size of Greece, which has 10 million people.

William Carey, father of modern missions, left England in 1797 and worked among the Bengalis, yet today this group is considered the largest of unreached people groups.



**Location:** north of India—it was formerly part of India

**Population:** 170 million

**Religion:** Muslim 89%; Hindu 9%; Christian 2.5%

### DISPATCH

As the plane veered to the right to land in Dhaka, I could see the many fingers of rivers crossing green fields, a reminder of how vulnerable Bangladesh is to rivers, monsoons, and floods. This country, carved out of northeast India, is built on a delta, a young nation established after a bloody war. This is a people not only struggling to keep their head above the ever-rising floods but vigorously seeking to find their way into the modern world.

After defeating the British and then separating from Pakistan, Bangladesh has an enormous gap between a very small upper layer of the wealthy and a much larger layer of those living in poverty. While fashioning itself as a secular democracy, it really is a Muslim-majority country, incited by modern Islam.

What is overwhelming is to see people

everywhere—170 million in a small land. Imagine that number living in one-third of the Canadian province of Manitoba, or half the U.S. population forced into the state of Florida. In Canada, population density is 3.3 people per square kilometer; in Bangladesh, it is 1,086 persons per square kilometer. Its packed world must be experienced to be understood.

The people are loving and generous and we felt at home. Their life is tough and they know their share of suffering. Politically birthed in a bloodbath of 3 million dead, its nationhood withstands floods that wash away everything they own. Christians feel the snubs as a religious minority, but not once did I hear the suggestion that life is too tough. No complaining. no wishing for what others have. Though they have so little, their celebrations opened our hearts. They were easy to love.



While their hospitality and generosity were genuine and greatly appreciated, Bangladesh is laden with enormous burdens of poverty, ignorance and life-choking bribery. Literacy is at best 50 percent. Many live in homes so primitive, you wonder how they survive. A government rife with graft is so brazen that it has become a



way of life—institutionalized; starting at the top of government, it works its tentacles through all of public life. When one is working with anything official, nothing happens without greasing the wheel. Getting a job requires an up-front payment. To land a job in the police force, for example, an applicant pays a major bribe and then works for ten years to pay back the loan.

Cheap labor attracts manufacturers of everything from T-shirts to lawnmowers. The GDP has grown rapidly, driven by this labor market, but economists warn that the burden of corruption is disabling the country.

## LEADERSHIP

Younger leaders here are the kind you could drop into any country or situation and know they would land on their feet. They are bright, wise, creative, courageous and deeply committed to the Lord Jesus. And they are indigenous. The world has changed and the period of foreign missions leading national ministries is over.

The Christian community here is still small: 2.5 percent. With approximately 6,000 churches,

the relief and development side of agency work is large and growing. For example, the Canadian Food Grains Bank works with the Nazarene Church and World Relief Canada with Koinonia, a division of the National Fellowship. Each denomination builds its own residential schools to serve children of Christian families discriminated against in the public schools.

I saw maps, plans, and statistics—Christian leaders careful in their planning. They explain their strategy of introducing Christ to villages, communities, and regions. The Jesus film has been a particular accelerator in conversions. One pastor working with Hindus focused on entire families and villages. In one day, he said, he had baptized 4,000 Hindus.

The vast population allows for all kinds of evangelistic groups to come unannounced and stay on their own, moving about (and also leaving quickly) and thus causing some to wonder why foreign engagement is so independent. However, this isn't the first country in which evangelicals have been guilty of allowing entrepreneurial evangelism to run unchecked.

The city of Dhaka is a photographer's dream. Colorful and idiosyncratic, anything you imagine you might see you probably can find. Traffic is fascinating. Cairo, Bangkok, and Nairobi are wild, but this city holds its own madness. Drivers are bizarre and brilliant. Deft at missing another, in a strange way they look out for each other. Tens upon thousands of rickshaws moving around motor cars, trucks, and cycles, all on a decrepit and broken infrastructure, make a simple journey an adventure.

One day, we were to go northeast to meet Christians. They wanted to meet us—most had never seen a white person. We wanted to go too, but stomach revenge exacted its price—we were immobilized. Even so, that evening, a young man from the village arrived with gifts they had prepared for our visit. Since we couldn't come to them, they would come to us. Lovely hand-crafted gifts, from those with so little, all with words of gracious love. As the young pastor was leaving, I asked, "How long is the return bus

ride?" "Four and a half hours" was the reply.

Why did it matter that they meet us? I recall as a boy hearing Nicholas Benghu from South Africa in my home church, telling of God's love. There are times when hearing it from another, someone outside of your world, has impact. The missionary enterprise is important and alive and well. But I learned in this dynamic and busy world that the sustaining development of Christian life is ultimately through the strength of its national pastors and leaders.

Please get this message out: Your prayers and financial investment in these men and women are worth every moment and each dollar.

### TODAY'S READING

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*

*For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

—Colossians 1:15–19

### ITEMS FOR PRAYER

- As younger leaders increasingly guide the church in Bangladesh, pray they would be

wise, finding ways to cooperate in spiritual unity, retaining boldness and creativity.

- While technically there is freedom of religion in Bangladesh, intimidation and discrimination are often used to corral the gospel witness. Pray Christians would be fearless in their testimony of Christ and pray for political protection for its pastors, churches and missions.
- Many leaders require support from outside, especially during flood times. The large number of NGOs is important for the well-being of the country. Pray for these many Christian missions.

### PRAYER

*Gracious Lord, in Bangladesh, this country of great need and mixed with amazing opportunities, our prayer is today that younger men and women showing here such dedication to your call will be encouraged as they continue in faith. During the rainy season and regular occasions of flooding, the work done in your name resonates with the love you want these special people to know and feel. May those of us with more than enough be generous in our help and support of ministries in Bangladesh. And may our children and grandchildren find ways and means of helping in the building of this country, which in time will know that Jesus is Lord. Amen.*

*"That together you may with one voice glorify the  
God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

*—Romans 15:6*



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