

Anglican-Lutheran Society

Annual Meeting 2021

By Zoom from All-Hallows-by-the-Tower, Byward Street, London EC3 5BJ

Saturday 6th March, 2021

‘WITNESS THROUGH SERVICE AND SACRIFICE’ Martyrdom and the Church Today

Henrietta Blythe, CEO of Open Doors UK and Ireland

“The Work of Open Doors”.

Imagine you are a 30 year old woman married to a church leader living in Northern Nigeria. You're pregnant with your third child, and you kiss your husband goodbye as you set off to the clinic to get a check-up. You're excited. You're going to be gone for a few days. You set off on your journey, and while you're on the way you get a text message telling you that your husband has been shot by militant Fulani herdsmen. You turn round and get back just in time to see his body in a newly dug grave. You're unable to stay for the funeral. How would you feel?

Two or three weeks later COVID-19 strikes and the whole of Nigeria is put into lock-down. You have no way of going out and earning money to feed yourself and your two small daughters. You turn to your in-laws for help but, far from helping you, they take away some of your most valued possessions. You hear that the government is distributing food-aid and you're so relieved. 'Help at last!' But you go to the distribution point and you're turned away, empty-handed because you are a Christian. How would you feel?



This is the story of Rose, pictured here with two of her daughters, whose husband Matthew was murdered while out on patrol by militant Fulani herdsmen on April 7th last year. Finally Rose received help from an Open Doors partner just after she'd given birth to her third daughter. And when our partner arrived Rose said, 'I never imagined I would receive such gifts but today my faith has been strengthened.'

340million Christians, that's five times the population of the UK, are experiencing unprecedented levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith, and the

shocking thing is how little we as Christians in the UK and Ireland know about what's happening to them.

Open Doors exists to raise mass awareness about what's happening to our persecuted brothers and sisters, and then to invite people to join a vast underground global network that is praying for and supporting persecuted Christians around the world and strengthening the Church to stand strong and continue sharing Jesus no matter the cost, despite the efforts of extremists to wipe out Christianity.

Rose's story sadly demonstrates what we call 'the smash and the squeeze of persecution'.

This year Nigeria is number nine in the World Watch List, the list we compile from Open Doors research of the 50 most dangerous countries in the world for Christians. If violence was the only criterion we used in our research Nigeria would actually be number one on the list. Last year 3530 Christians were slaughtered in Nigeria for their faith. That means that, on average, ten Christians in Nigeria die every single day.

Islamic extremists such as Boko Haram and militant Fulani herdsmen took advantage of the COVID-19 lock-downs to dramatically increase their attacks on Christians. They are armed and often they enter villages on motorbikes carrying AK47s, sometimes carrying grenade launchers. They destroy churches, they murder pastors and they abduct women and girls.

Matthew, Rose's husband, was out on patrol to protect the village when he was murdered, and we know that last year the killings peaked during the months of lock-down between April and September. And sadly Rose is typical because as a widow she has become the main breadwinner for herself and her children, and she has found no help from her extended family. Life is extremely difficult for Christian women in these situations. They are doubly vulnerable because of both their gender and their faith. If their husbands die, their social standing in these communities is already low and life can become impossible. There's a reason why the Bible tells us to look after widows and orphans.

Rose is also typical because she was discriminated against in the distribution of food-aid last year. We know that COVID-19 has put new weapons into the hands of persecutors and those who wish to eradicate Christianity. In so many countries, more than I can remember, Christians have been discriminated against in the distribution of food-aid and basic supplies. In India, for example, 80% of the 150,000 Christians Open Doors partners supported said they'd experienced this discrimination. We know that Christian health workers have also been denied access to PPE. We know that lock-downs mean that attacks can continue as in Northern Nigeria with impunity because the security forces are busy enforcing the restrictions required.

We know that COVID-19 has given a quasi-legitimate excuse to totalitarian regimes like China and North Korea to increase control and surveillance over their citizens. North Korea closed its borders entirely at the beginning of the pandemic, not just to people trying to get out but to people going in so we know very little about what is going on in that country. We know that surveillance in China has dramatically increased. They have increased the use of facial recognition technology and other methods of control over their citizens and particularly Christians and the churches and, of course, women have been forced to stay at home with the very people that abuse them on account of both their

gender and their faith. We know there's been a rise in domestic violence in the UK during lock-down.

Many Christian women face this vulnerability, especially Christian women who are converts where they face attack from their immediate family, and if they are already experiencing domestic abuse it gets even worse.

Now I have brought with me a film showing what's happening in the top ten countries for the persecution of Christians on the 20/21 Open Doors World Watch List.

The commentary on the film went through the list in reverse order:

- 10 India where extreme Hindus want to rid India of Christians and use extreme violence to achieve their goal.*
- 9 Nigeria where more Christians are murdered for their faith than any other country in the world.*
- 8 Iran where secret house churches risk being raided by the police and if people are caught they have to be prepared for a long prison sentence.*
- 7 Yemen, a war-torn country where Christians, if found, face the death penalty.*
- 6 Eritrea where Christians can be imprisoned without trial in appalling conditions and where, often, their loved ones don't know if they're still alive.*
- 5 Pakistan where, if you say the wrong thing, the notorious 'blasphemy laws' can accuse you of insulting Islam and you can be sentenced to death.*
- 4 Libya, a lawless land with no freedom of speech or belief.*
- 3 Somalia where Somali Christians can't reveal their faith to anyone or they could be killed – even by their own families.*
- 2 Afghanistan where, if they find you are a Christian you're given a stark choice – flee the country or be killed*
- 1 North Korea is the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christians, and where informants are everywhere. Discovery means death – either by execution or by being worked to death in a labour camp.*

So you've asked me to tell you how Open Doors works. We started with Brother Andrew back in the 1950s who smuggled Bibles across the Iron Curtain. And we still smuggle Bibles and I'll talk a bit about that later. But obviously since then the work has expanded greatly. During COVID a lot of our work has been providing food and basic supplies simply to keep the church alive. So I mentioned the Christians in India, and one of the challenges of lock-down is that many Christians are poor and are daily-wage-earners. So lock-down has meant they can't leave the house, they can't therefore go and work. Very quickly they have no food, nothing to feed their families. Last year we heard many stories of people actually considering suicide because they had nothing with which to feed their families. As a result, church leaders, particularly those in rural areas, who rely on the weekly tithe and collection plate were also in dire straits. The Church was literally at risk of starving to death. So a lot of our efforts have gone on providing food and basic supplies to keep people going.

This, of course, this has also given the Church a huge opportunity to be a powerful witness in their communities as well, and we've heard some inspirational stories. For example, in northern Sri Lanka one church our partners are working with had experienced a lot of persecution from their Hindu neighbours in the summer of 2019. One man in particular had been very badly beaten by their relations, and when the man's wife and two other women from the church went to try to help him they too were very badly beaten. A few

months later COVID struck and the whole community went into lock-down. The Pastor of this church realised that it wouldn't just be Christians but the whole community would also suffer tremendous difficulties. He asked Open Doors partners to provide enough supplies not just for the church to feed their congregation but also food to support 100 families in the community. And The Pastor reported to us that as a result the atmosphere in the community has completely changed and even people in local government who had been very anti-the church up to then had changed their attitude. It's been so encouraging to see the church being both salt and light in that community.

In many countries Christians are forced to flee their villages, sometimes with nothing but the clothes on their backs. These internally displaced people need everything to start a new



life somewhere else. We heard about Foria a few months ago, a woman in Mozambique pictured here. Now the Islamic extremism we have seen in Nigeria had gradually been spreading across Sub-Saharan Africa which means that new countries have entered the World Watch List this year. The Democratic Republic of Congo and also Mozambique which entered the watch list for the first time in 2020 at number 45.

Foria's village was invaded and this is what she told our partners. She said, 'We were all surprised. The attackers rounded us up and forced us to get into an open space using a path through grass and bush. I managed to hide in some of the tall grass. They didn't see me, but I watched everything that was happening. I saw them tie up my husband's hands and torture him shouting "Allahu Akbar!" [God is most great] before they cut his throat. I saw them kill my brother and some other men in the same way. Then finally they left, taking with them my sisters and some other women. I've not heard from any of them since. I don't know if they're alive or dead.'

Foria didn't have time to bury her husband or her brother. She rushed home and gathered up 14 children, her own, her brother's and her sisters' and they started fleeing through the bush. They finally arrived at Nampula, a large town nearby. They asked a cousin if they could stay with him, but after a couple of days he became superstitious and nervous and they had to leave. They found somewhere to rent but it took all her money. They were desperately in need when Open Doors partners managed to reach her and give her the basic supplies and food that she and the children need to keep going.

Open Doors also continues to provide Bibles and Christian resources and last year we distributed 1.8million Bibles. I don't need to tell you that the Word of God is gold! It's so powerful! And I sometimes think that persecutors seem to understand the power and importance of the Bible, even more than we do in the West. We've become so used to having Bibles we're sometimes in danger of forgetting what a powerful book it is. My husband and I were reflecting that we probably have ten Bibles in our house, all different translations, and we take them all for granted. But in so many countries it's both difficult and dangerous to own a Bible.

You saw from the film that North Korea remains the most dangerous country to be a Christian. It's been number one on the World Watch List for the last 20 years. In North Korea, if you are found with a Bible you face immediate imprisonment, and not just you but your family members as well. We think that there are some 3-400,000 Christians in North Korea, 60,000 of them currently held in internment camps where they face torture, starvation, forced labour and forced re-education.

Similarly, in China owning a Bible or trying to purchase one is a dangerous activity. Since 2018 we've seen China rocket up the World Watch List. This year China is number 17. In 2018 Xi Jinping's government changed the religious regulation laws making the purchase of online Bibles illegal, and making it illegal for anyone under the age of 18 to attend church. Last year we heard that in some regions of China the Bible is actually being rewritten. The government is trying to make religion more Chinese and more in line with Chinese Communist. In one region we learned of an ethics textbook that has rewritten the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery had been completely changed. So in this ethics textbook it says that when Jesus had sent everyone else away he stoned the woman himself.

We also do a lot of discipleship training to ensure that children and girls and new converts can be disciple and learn more about this Jesus they've come to put their trust and faith in. I visited Egypt a couple of years ago and two projects particularly struck me.

One was with the Bible Society and it was working with children. Now Egypt in theory is a secular country but it's obviously majority Islam and Christian children at school experience a lot of bullying and scorn from their Muslim classmates who taunt them with jibes like 'You worship THREE gods, not one' and this project at the Bible Society is an interactive project that enables children to find out where the Bible comes from, what are the stories, why it's important, whether it's true or not. This equips them to respond knowledgeably to the taunts they are getting in the playground.



Another project that really inspired me was for Christian teenage girls who, growing up in an Islamic culture, are absolutely at the bottom of the pile. They are female, they are Christian and they have very low self-esteem, and no sense of their identity as children of God. The project shows them what the Bibles says

about their identity, mentoring them, coaching them and supporting them. It was so inspiring to see the effect this coaching and teaching was having on these young women's lives.

Finally, we do many other things, but the one I want to bring to your attention is how we connect Christians together. It's not uncommon in many countries for Christians to believe

that they are the only Christian believer in that country. I heard recently of somebody in Yemen who had come to faith but who was absolutely convinced that they were the only one in the country who knew about Jesus. So much of the work we do is intended to help Christians find each other so that they know that they are never alone.

So, for example, one of our partners in India, for example, enabled 100 families to meet to celebrate Christmas. For many of them it was the first time they'd ever had that opportunity. In the Middle East we use radio broadcasts and online communications to connect people with each other.

I visited Bangladesh a couple of years ago and was privileged to attend a conference Open Doors partners were running for young people. I suppose there were about 300 there and on the last night there was a worship service and to see these young people dancing, they were shouting, they were singing – they were loving it! It was like an explosion of joy! It was rare for these young people to express their love for the Lord and to celebrate together. It's an image that will stay with me for the rest of my life. But just that morning, in a prayer session, one of them had said to us, 'Please will you pray for me because tomorrow I will take the bus back to my village where there are only 15 Christians and if our neighbours knew they would kill us.'

Here in the UK and Ireland our primary role is to connect Church here with our persecuted Church family. Now that is obviously to enable us to strengthen the persecuted Church through prayer, to support them in practical ways – I've already explained some of the needs they have – and also of course to speak out on their behalf, in advocacy with our own Members of Parliament and other influential bodies. But I think that connection is two-way. The Church here also needs the witness and testimony of our persecuted brothers and sisters. One of the things I've seen is that they are not victims they are "overcomers", as Bishop Guli was saying this morning. I'm reminded frequently of those verses in Revelation: they overcame by the word of their testimony, the blood of the Lamb, and because they were not afraid to shrink from death. Our persecuted brothers and sisters are "overcomers" and how we need their witness and testimony. Their faith inspires us. Their conviction and example dramatically invigorates ours.

One final story: I met a woman in Malaysia the year before last. She had become a Christian and she came from a Muslim family. When she became a Christian her husband said to her. 'You need to choose between me and your Jesus.' She chose Jesus and he threw her and her five children onto the street. She told me it had been incredibly difficult. She had a small food business but it was nevertheless a real struggle to keep her and the children alive. One night when she was lying in bed she heard someone come into the room. She couldn't turn in the bed, it was as though she had become paralysed. She felt something touch the side of her body and she was flooded with heat. She told me, 'I just knew that it was the Lord.' From that moment on her business took off and she and her children have been well cared for and have wanted for nothing. What struck me as she told her story was that her face was literally shining, and she turned to me and said, 'I know him!' And that's what I've learnt from our persecuted brothers and sisters. They've had to make a choice. Is Jesus really worth it? Is he worth facing this pain, this struggle, this discrimination, this squeezing and gradual suffocation of our lives? Some of them decide he isn't, but so many decide he is. Their faith is a beacon. We need to be in relationship with them, and to be family together.

I see us a supporting *ligament* and let me finish with this: as the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians chapter 4.11-16, because he expresses what we are trying to do in connecting the Body of Christ together. He wrote this:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.