



Prayer for the Persecuted Church for December 1, 2023

Prayer for the Persecuted Church: Our Best Practices

Our focus in this hour is on prayer for the global church, not ourselves or our local issues. We can talk and even pray for those other things after prayer meeting is over at 1:00 p.m.

We strive to start our prayers by 12:10.

We are blessed to have a growing number of praying people join us. Let's all offer short prayers throughout our prayer time, allowing time for everyone to pray out loud if they wish. We are blessed by prayers when we can hear them, but silent prayers from our people are as valued as spoken ones.

Thank you for praying for the persecuted church. Encourage friends to pray, too!

Pray for imprisoned or kidnapped Christians

CHRISTIANS IN PRISON: This list is only a sample: CAMBODIA: Theary Seng; CHINA: Li Jie, Hang Xiaodong, Wang Qiang; John Cao, Yan Hwa, Goa Zhisheng, Wang Yi; Hao Zhiwei, Zhang Shaojie, Li Juncai, Lian Xu Liang; ERITREA: Meron Gebreselasie, Mussia Ezas, Dr. Kifly Gebremeskel, Kidane Weldou, Haile Nayzgi; INDIA: Pastor Sawan; KAZAKHSTAN: Pastor Maximov; NORTH KOREA: Zhang Wen Shi PAKISTAN: Zafar Bhatti; VIETNAM: Nguyen Nang Tinh, Nguyen Trung Ton

KIDNAPPED VICTIMS: Raymond Koh, Gilbert Biswas, Leah Sharibu, Sarah Atef, Joshua Hilmya & wife Ruth Sitepu, Hormoz Diril. *From ICC*

SPECIAL PRAYER REQUEST FROM OUR CONGREGATION:

One family of Muslim Background Believers currently attending College Church requests prayer for their sister and family seeking asylum in another country. There is a possibility of their being forcibly returned to Iran from the middle-eastern country to which they fled. They have an appointment December 12 at a consulate in the hopes of getting permission to travel to a different country. This is the next step in their being granted refugee status and ultimately being granted asylum. Let's join them in praying that the December 12 meeting will go well and that they would find safety in a new country rather than being returned to Iran.

From International Christian Concern

Jihadists on Motorcycles Kidnap 110 in Nigeria

11/27/2023 Nigeria (ICC)

Gunmen abducted more than 100 people from the Mutunji community in Zamfara State in northwest Nigeria last weekend for not paying a tax imposed by the bandits. A leader in the community was also killed, according to locals. The village is made up of both Muslims and Christians, but bandits with ties to radical factions of Islam want to eradicate Christians.

- **HOW TO PRAY:** *Pray for the immediate return of those who remain missing.*
- *Pray for the family of the leader who was killed.*
- *Pray for better security measures for this community.*

ADF Militants Murder 14 in the DRC

11/27/2023 DRC (ICC)

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamic

State affiliate located in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), attacked a farming community in the North Kivu province on November 14. Utilizing their signature style of violence, the group killed 14 farmers using machetes, brutally beheading them where they worked in their fields.

- *HOW TO PRAY: Pray for comfort and peace for those who lost loved ones.*
- *Pray for provision for those who have since fled their homes.*
- *Pray for healing for those who witnessed this brutal attack.*

Christian Killed in His Home by Muslim Extremist

11/27/2023 Pakistan (ICC)

Farhan ul-Qamar, a 20-year-old Christian man, was shot and killed in his home two weeks ago by a Muslim extremist claiming hatred toward both Christians and Jews. The incident is another example of the growing religious hatred in Pakistan. After the murder, the attacker held the family hostage for nearly an hour, refusing to allow them to call for help.

- *HOW TO PRAY: Pray for comfort for this family in light of this traumatic event.*
- *Pray for the attacker to come to know Christ.*
- *Pray for the gospel to spread among Muslims in this region.*

Muslim Extremists Pose Threat in Southeast Asia

11/27/2023 Southeast Asia (ICC)

New data from Pew Research has found that Muslims and Buddhists in Southeast Asia believe Muslim extremists are more concerning and dangerous than the growth of 'minority' religions like Christianity in their region. This study looked at religious tolerance in six countries in the region:

Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Cambodia.

- *HOW TO PRAY: Pray for Muslims across Southeast Asia to come to know Jesus.*
- *Pray for protection for Christian leaders in the region. Pray for growth for the church in these nations.*

Voice of the Martyrs Global Prayer Guide

SOMALIA

OVERVIEW:

Most Somalis believe that to be Somali is to be Muslim, so those who come to faith in Christ are accused of rejecting not only their religion but also their nationality. After years of drought and civil war, more Somalis live outside Somalia than within its borders, and Somalis often take their Islamist cultural norms with them wherever they go. Therefore, those who faithfully serve Christ or convert from Islam in Somali communities throughout the world face severe persecution regardless of national laws. Even so, the dispersion of Somali people has also created unique opportunities to reach them with the gospel. Somalis are more reachable and open than ever before, and many have chosen to follow Christ, including some who are willing to reach out to other Somalis at any cost.

MAJOR RELIGION:

Nearly all Somalis are Sunni Muslims, with especially radicalized Islamist views.

PERSECUTOR:

The al-Shabab terrorist organization and other Islamist groups persecute Christians, as do the government, communities and families.

WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN SOMALIA:

There are no church buildings in Somalia, and Christians must exercise extreme care when meeting in groups. It is strictly

illegal to convert or evangelize. Christians are actively pursued, and when discovered they are immediately killed. Christians are more likely to be killed by al-Shabab or family members than to be imprisoned by the government. The autonomous region of Somaliland has seen a recent increase in the number of underground Christians being arrested.

ACCESS TO BIBLES:

Bibles are illegal and extremely dangerous to own. Most believers access digital versions on their phones or other digital devices.

VOM WORK:

VOM equips believers and supports those who share their faith inside Somalia. VOM also supports media efforts that reach inside the country.

PRAYER REQUESTS:

- *Pray that children of Somali Christians will grow strong and wise in faith.*
- *Pray for believers who are isolated and unable to fellowship with other Christians.*
- *Pray for media ministries reaching Somali people around the world.*
- *Pray that the Lord will soften the hearts of government leaders toward Christians.*
- *Pray that Somali believers will be able to remain in the country and share the gospel.*
- *Pray for unity among Somali believers and those working with them.*
- *Pray for the families of Somali believers who have been killed for their faith.*
- *Pray for Christians recently arrested in Somaliland, and pray also for their families.*
- *Pray that Somali youth who have become disillusioned with Islam will seek and find the Truth.*
- *Pray for the establishment of open, visible Somali churches in Africa.*

*From Voice of the Martyrs
icommittoprayer.com*

Nov. 30, 2023 | Israel

God at Work Amid the Horror of War

Front-line workers shared how God is moving in Israel, including Gaza and the West Bank, amid the conflict raging throughout the region. One Christian leader said, "Please pray for believers inside of Gaza. As the conflict intensifies, and the possibilities of death increase, there is a growing intentionality to share the gospel with friends and families. We have heard testimonies of those living in shelters because their homes have been damaged and are sharing boldly — and there seems to be an openness." Another ministry leader reported that an Israeli soldier gave his life to the Lord and was baptized shortly before being called to active military service. There have also been reports of Christians from a Jewish background meeting with Christian Arabs and Palestinians. "These days, we must be a people of hope in the midst of so much hopelessness. And hope is only a wish if it is not hope in Christ," a front-line worker said.

Nov. 30, 2023 | Brunei

Decree Requires Islamic Indoctrination of All Children

In October 2023, the government of the Islamic sultanate of Brunei announced a radical change in education policy to be implemented from Nov. 1. All 2nd to 5th grade students, including Christian children, are required to attend one hour per day of Islamic instruction. This includes practicing Islamic prayers and studying the Quran. This decree from the sultan applies to public and private schools. Front-line workers ask for prayer that all Christian children in Brunei will be properly disciplined at home and at church so that they will be grounded in God's Word.

Nov. 30, 2023 | India

Pastor Harassed, Imprisoned over Conversion Claims

Since 2020, Pastor Santosh has been harassed and pressured by members of the Hindu nationalist group RSS. His church has been vandalized, he has been threatened and struck, and the group has repeatedly pressured the police to file charges against him for conversion of Hindus. In October 2022, he was jailed for a month without bail. “When a person goes to jail, he breaks,” Santosh said. “I felt broken, too. After coming out of the jail, I was petrified. I did not go any place for months. I was afraid about what next I would see. People in the streets would hatefully see me as if I was a criminal.” In the aftermath of his arrest, Santosh’s church has not been able to reopen, but he continues to visit congregants at home to pray with and encourage them. His case is still pending. Pray for a just resolution and that he will experience God’s provision.

Weekly Prayer Update from Mission Eurasia

Our colleagues in **Ukraine** ask you to pray for Ukrainian young people. Please pray that the Lord would provide opportunities for their educational and professional growth, even amidst the ongoing conflict. Please continue to pray for peace in this war-torn and increasingly destitute land.

Our School Without Walls (SWW) national leaders in **Azerbaijan** would like to share a praise and prayer request. Praise God that a new house church has been planted and that SWW graduates are actively involved in the ministry of this church. Please pray that God would bless the efforts of our colleagues among Christian young people and that the church in Azerbaijan would grow.

Our SWW colleagues in the Central Asian country of **Kyrgyzstan** ask you to pray for their physical well-being, their relationships with one another, and that they would be able to continue working well with Kyrgyz young people whom they are training for ministry. Please pray for fruitful work among the small

Christian population in this nation where ministry is challenging.

Mission Eurasia’s SWW colleagues in **Belarus** have asked for your prayers for one of their students. A young man named Irko has said that the Lord has been leading him to work with the local church. Please pray for the Lord to guide Irko’s steps and use him powerfully in his home nation..

Prayer Calendar from Open Doors USA

Iran

December 1

As Christmas approaches, pray for protection for Iranian house churches. The government often cracks down on Christians during this time.

December 2

Pray for families whose loved ones are imprisoned for their faith. Father, surround these families with your peace—give them signs of your hope.

December 3

Darya* is a house church leader. Pray for protection and discernment for leaders like her, that this month, they would be even more vigilant in their actions.

December 4

Praise God for the release of Joseph Shahbazian from Tehran’s Evin Prison, jailed for his faith in Christ! Our family in Iran asks us to pray for his recovery and protection.

December 5

Shahin and her husband want to adopt a child but Iran’s laws prohibit non-Muslims from adopting. “I will tell the truth, I’m a Christian,” she says, “please pray God would help us and add a new member to our family.”

Brunei

December 6

Pray for provision for Bruneians who feel pressured to convert to Islam. Muslims receive more financial support than people from other religions, and the cost of following Jesus is real.

December 7

Please pray for this situation, where economic inequality has pushed people to do whatever they can to survive.

From Barnabas Aid

Prayer Diary

FRIDAY 17

“God, you see and hear the cries of your people,” said a Nigerian Christian as he sang and danced in joy, praising God for the arrival of Barnabas-funded aid for six Christian-majority villages in Kaduna State that have endured incessant attacks by Islamist terrorists. Kaduna State endures high levels of jihadi violence. At least 23 pastors have been murdered and more than 200 churches forced to shut across the state in the last four years.

- *Pray for God’s protection over His people and His Church in Nigeria. Ask that Christians remain steadfast in their faith, in spite of the ever-present threat of violence against them.*

SATURDAY 18

Thousands of people were forced to flee from their homes as fighting intensified in the Sudanese state of South Kordofan. South Kordofan is home to many Christians, most of whom live in the Nuba Mountains region in the north of the state. Observers have predicted that the state might lapse into a full-scale civil war as conflict continues to rage across the entire country.

- *Lift up to the Lord His people in South Kordofan and throughout Sudan, as well as those who have fled for safety in neighboring countries. Pray that there will be peace for all the people of Sudan.*

SUNDAY 19

- *Heavenly Father, we intercede for Your church in Eritrea and call upon You to*

fortify our brothers and sisters amid much persecution.

- *We particularly bring before You those imprisoned under harsh conditions for their love and devotion for You. Please enable them to endure, and bring about their release from captivity.*
- *We thank You that the Word of God is never in chains and that Your truth can reach the darkest corners of society. We pray for a mighty strengthening of Your people across Eritrea, for we ask in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Timothy 2:9)*

MONDAY 20

Thousands of people were displaced from their homes by devastating flooding that struck parts of Oromia, Ethiopia, during the June-September rainy season. Ethiopia and some neighboring countries have suffered drought for several years, leaving the ground so parched that it could not soak up the sudden rainfall. There are around 20 million Oromo Christians.

- *Pray for our brothers and sisters, and all those affected, asking that they will receive the help that they need. Ask the Lord, who “supplies the earth with rain” (Psalm 147:8), to bring an end to both flooding and drought in the Horn of Africa.*

TUESDAY 21

More than 30 heavily armed Islamists set fire to a church building and at least ten houses in Lamu West on Kenya’s coast on August 21. Members of al-Shabaab struck Salama village, looting homes and stealing goats. The gang went on to ambush and kill a truck driver and his co-driver nearby. Salama village was also attacked in June by suspected militants who killed five people and razed six homes.

- *Ask for comfort for villagers who lost their church and homes in the attack,*

and ask that they receive the strength to rebuild. Pray for the bereaved, and ask that attacks by al-Shabaab will cease.

WEDNESDAY 22

Potentially hundreds of lives were saved as Ugandan police foiled an Islamic State (IS – also known as ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) bomb plot that targeted a church in the national capital of Kampala on Sunday, September 3. A jihadi bomber was arrested as he was about to enter the church with an improvised explosive device. Five more suspected IS fighters were arrested in the days that followed, and five other bombs discovered in Kampala.

- *Praise the Lord for protecting the lives of His people from their opponents (Psalm 64:1).*
- *Pray that any other planned attacks will be thwarted.*

THURSDAY 23

“Your support and prayers make us feel healed and our tears are wiped away,” said Alganyira, a survivor of a massacre at a Christian boarding school in Kasese District, Uganda, in which 42 believers – mostly students – were killed by Islamists. Barnabas met the medical bills of survivors and provided counseling for them and the bereaved. We also supported members of the traumatized community, including providing food for 700 vulnerable households. Pray that God, who makes wars cease, will bring peace to this community and help it rebuild (Psalm 46:9-11). Ask that they remain strong during these difficult times.

From Help the Persecuted

PRAYER REQUESTS

NABIL, YEMEN

When Nabil and his brother Ali's faith became known to their Muslim family, they both received death threats. Ali's wife and daughter murdered Ali by putting poison in his food. Nabil is grieving this loss and praying for protection.

- *Pray that God would help Nabil in his grief over his brother's death and keep him protected from all evil.*
- *Ask the Lord to give him wisdom regarding where to flee.*
- *Pray that his family, including his persecutors, will come to know the saving love of Jesus Christ.*

UZAIR, ALGERIA

Uzair and his family left everything they owned and fled their city when they received threats that their children would be kidnapped because of their faith in Christ. They refused to renounce the Lord and are now on the run.

- *Ask that God would honor Uzair's deep faithfulness to Him and keep the entire family, especially the children, out of harm's way.*
- *Pray that they would feel the nearness and love of God in a challenging time.*

ABBAS, EGYPT

Abbas, a pastor, had to flee Sudan after their church was besieged by a terrorist group, their home was looted, and all of their belongings were stolen. Now, he is trying to rebuild his life in Egypt and is searching for a job.

- *Ask God to provide Abbas a job that provides well for his family.*
- *Pray that He will help Abbas and the family heal after losing everything for the sake of Jesus.*

SAID, MOROCCO

After sharing with his family that Jesus Christ is his Lord and savior, Said's family rejected him and accused him of betrayal. His life is now being threatened.

- *Pray that God would spare Said's life, protecting him from his family.*
- *Ask that God would tend to Said's*

heart as he struggles with rejection, reminding Said that He is near to the brokenhearted.

BASEM, ALGERIA

When Basem's wife and kids found out that he had become a Christian, they abandoned him. He is grieving their absence.

- *Ask the Lord to wrap His arms around Basem through the Body of Christ, showing him that he has an eternal family in the Church.*
- *Pray for the Lord to soften the hearts of his wife and children, that they, too, can discover who Jesus truly is.*

AHMED, ALGERIA

When Ahmed's brothers found out that he had become a Christian, they began to threaten him. Now Ahmed is prevented from finding a job.

- *Pray that God would provide Ahmed a way of escape from his brothers as well as a job that would help Ahmed live a life of dignity.*
- *Pray that his brothers would come to discover the beauty of the Gospel.*

YASMINA, ALGERIA

When Yasmina lost her husband to COVID, she longed to return to her family for help with raising her three children. However, they refused to welcome her back because of her faith in Jesus.

- *Pray that as Yasmina mourns the rejection of her family, the Body of Christ comforts her.*
- *Pray that God will raise up people to help her with her children and that her whole family would come to know Jesus.*

REEM, EGYPT

When Reem's son found out that she had become a Christian, he began to actively persecute her, preventing her from living in peace. She is constantly tormented.

- *Pray that God would give Reem stamina to endure this suffering and ultimately relief.*
- *Ask Him to soften the heart of her son, that he would come to know Jesus as his Savior and stop tormenting Reem.*

OMAR, EGYPT

Omar, a pastor, lost his home and all official documents in a war in Sudan. Then, persecution forced them to flee. Now settling in Egypt, he is looking for a job to support his family.

- *Pray that the Lord would provide a job for Omar that will give him a solid start as he rebuilds his life.*
- *Pray that Omar and his family would have a time of peace and rest after persecution.*

HASSAN, MOROCCO

Hassan's family is forcing him to study the Quran. He wants to openly declare his faith in Christ, but he is afraid of the persecution that will inevitably follow.

- *Pray that God would strengthen Hassan to have the resolve to stay firm in his faith and declare it openly at the right time.*
- *Pray that God would spare Hassan from persecution and that his family would come to know Jesus.*

ANSWERED PRAYERS

HEBA, EGYPT

"I will never forsake my faith. I know that Jesus will help me, and he did! Through you! Thank you for being my side."

From Christianity Today

Chinese Christians Use Zoom for Church. The Government Is Making That Harder.

Pastors are looking to new options as technical difficulties plague their go-to video conferencing platform.

SEAN CHENG AND ANGELA LU FULTON

NOVEMBER 30, 2023 On a hot night in August, Yong Shao, a small group leader of a house church in a major city in northern China, was about to start the weekly Zoom Bible study when he started receiving a barrage of messages from his small group members with an unexpected problem: Zoom wasn't working for them.

An IT professional, Yong went into troubleshooting mode. He suggested they update the Zoom app and switch to using cellphone data instead of Wi-Fi. In the past, these tricks worked when Zoom was down—but this time, nothing. As a backup, they decided to switch to an audio-only group call on WeChat, which Yong's church typically avoided due to government surveillance and censorship on the app. (CT has changed all names of people in China in this article due to security concerns).

Thankfully, the group didn't face any interruption or abrupt termination even as they mentioned sensitive religious words like Christ and eternal life. Yet the app limited the number of participants to 15 people, so some were unable to join, and the group's worship leader was unable to share the audio of the worship songs they planned to sing.

Since that night, Yong and the small group have continued to face problems with Zoom and have no choice but to continue to use WeChat.

Other Christian ministries in China have faced similar issues using Zoom in the past three months, according to interviews CT conducted with nine Chinese church leaders and ministry workers. While the company has not made any official announcement of being kicked out of China (Zoom's service status website states it is operational in China),

users on Reddit and Zoom's website have also complained about the outage as well. Zoom did not respond to CT's request to comment.

With a number of tech companies banned in China—including Meta, X (formerly Twitter), and Google—Zoom had become a lifeline for house churches turning to online gatherings during the pandemic and beyond. Not only is the app user-friendly, it is considered relatively safe for unregistered churches who want to keep their communications free from government monitoring (although the company agreed to suppress sensitive speech in order to remain in China). While WeChat has been known to cut off conversations or delete messages with sensitive terms, Christians haven't faced these problems with Zoom.

The full scope of the issue is still unknown. Some have said they found that Zoom accounts set up outside of China within the last year now no longer work in China. Some found that free accounts were unable to join Zoom meetings. Others wonder if the technical difficulties could be the result of the app complying with regional regulations. Chinese Christians Use Zoom for Church. The Government Is Making That Harder.

Pastors are looking to new options as technical difficulties plague their go-to video conferencing platform.

Still, amid an ever-changing climate for Christians, house churches have learned to be flexible in adjusting to new modes of worship. If Zoom no longer works, they'll find other ways to gather and worship God, whether that's using a different video conferencing platform, downloading virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent China's "Great Firewall," or only meeting in person.

Zoom's Challenges in China

Zoom, an American company with a sizable development team in China, is not without concern for Chinese Christians. After Chinese authorities blocked Zoom in 2019 claiming the company wasn't doing enough to suppress anti-government speech, CEO Eric Yuan visited China and agreed to monitor conversations on topics the Chinese Communist Party found sensitive,

according to court documents uncovered by CyberScoop. After that, Zoom's service resumed in China.

Evidence of that monitoring came in 2020, when the company shut down Zoom vigils on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre—one of the most sensitive historical events in China—and suspended the accounts of overseas dissidents at the request of Chinese authorities.

Zoom's annual report filed with the US Securities and Exchange Commission expressed the risk of working in China: "The Chinese government has at times turned off our service in China without warning and requested that we take certain steps prior to restoring our service, such as designating an in-house contact for law enforcement requests and transferring China-based user data housed in the United States to a data center in China."

Since August 2020, users in China have been unable to buy products directly from Zoom. Instead they need to purchase services through local third-party partners. Some Christians concerned about government surveillance responded by purchasing Zoom licenses in the US to use in China.

Still, Zoom has become an important tool for churches. Jeremy Liu, a minister in a small city in northern China, said that besides Bible study, his church uses Zoom for livestreaming Sunday worship, online devotionals, and discipleship training on topics like marriage, parenting, and mental health. When the COVID-19 lockdown began, his congregation divided into smaller groups and started using Zoom for all of its meetings. One benefit of the online meetings was that it widened the reach of Liu's church: "It allowed some of the Christians who live in the countryside surrounding the city and some who are elderly or sick to participate."

Yet last month, Liu's church was also unable to log into Zoom. Liu, who also has some background in IT, was eventually able to get Zoom to work but only after spending a large sum of the church's modest budget to purchase a specific software. (Liu did not

share the specifics for fear that it might "give the Chinese government ideas and help their censorship.")

Solomon Li, an overseas ministry leader to urban house churches, has heard widespread complaints about Zoom in the past few months. "I think it's part of the Great Firewall in China, and also China is forcing Zoom to comply with some local laws," he said. "Zoom is becoming more and more difficult for local churches and organizations to use, no doubt about it."

That's been the experience of Sarah Cheng, who works at a seminary in eastern China. She said that since August, 18 of the 20 Zoom licenses her team had purchased for the seminary and the house church associated with it had been inactivated. (By October, the remaining two also stopped working.)

Cheng said they had spent \$2,000 buying the one-year licenses in the US in May. When she called Zoom, the company said their activity had violated local laws and the American version of Zoom was not allowed in China. Zoom also refused to refund the nine remaining months left on the license.

Recently, Cheng noted that Chinese users of the free version of Zoom have received error messages when they try to join Zoom meetings set up by foreign accounts. She believes that the Chinese government is trying to force locals to use third-party partners, which comes with greater risks. "The tradeoff is everything you record, who joins the meeting, that data will be stored in China," Cheng said. "To us, that's very dangerous."

Only Zoom's business accounts (which require users to buy at least 10 licenses) work in China. Now, the seminary largely uses Webex, a conference platform that is not as user-friendly as Zoom, especially for recording or setting up meetings.

In-person-only churches

Not all house churches use Zoom or other online conferencing apps. Some even intentionally avoid meeting online. Pastor Shi Ming in Shanghai said his church used Zoom during the COVID-19 lockdown, but

they have stopped since February when they resumed in-person meetings. Their reasoning was more practical than security-driven: “As long as Zoom is permitted, people would find excuses not to come to the in-person church meetings,” Shi said.

To prepare for future tech bans, Yong, the small group leader, also believes churches need to rely less on technology. Instead, pastors and church leaders should “carry out offline pastoral care as much as possible, even if the number of people who can gather together is small,” Yong said. “Pastors should put more time and energy into visiting church members in person as much as possible to take care of every believer.”

Aaron Zhao, the pastor of a house church in a big city in central China, agrees and noted that his church does not livestream their Sunday worship on Zoom. However, his congregation still uses the video conferencing app for online prayer meetings. When they do, “more and more people have told us that it has become impossible to join the online meeting. Sometimes they cannot enter the Zoom meeting, sometimes there is no sound or video.” Because they do not use Zoom often, this has made only a small impact on their church life.

“If one day Zoom is eventually banned completely, we will switch to other online conference tools,” Zhao said. Yet he noted that they would not use Chinese apps like Tencent’s VooV or Alibaba’s DingTalk, as those are known to be tightly monitored by the government. Instead, they would need to use foreign apps that may need a VPN to access.

Debate over VPNs

House churches have different stances on whether or not they encourage their congregants to use VPNs, which are illegal in China. In some rare cases, the government has fined and arrested VPN users.

On one hand, churches like Zhao’s encourage the use of VPNs. He said it helped the church “communicate without barriers and avoid censorship.” In addition, it allows “believers to have more sources of information and listen to both sides of the news story so that they

will not be brainwashed by the Communist Party-controlled domestic media.”

On the other hand, Liu’s church does not encourage its members to use VPNs, even if he uses one personally. That’s because most of his church members are “older and less educated people for whom the technique is too difficult ... and VPN tools that normally can only be purchased from the black market have their own safety risks,” including malware, he said.

Sayah Tu, a campus ministry leader and Christian media editor on the east coast of China, has similar reservations about using VPNs. But he believes that it may become inevitable for house churches and fellowships to use VPNs to access needed Christian resources.

In the past few years, the government has blocked online Christian websites and WeChat accounts while shutting down independent Christian publishers.

“I hope that Christians in China ... would not always be limited by the Great Firewall for knowledge and education, but will learn more about the outside world and continue to have a forward-looking vision,” Tu said. He believes that being aware of the true situation in China through foreign sources helps Christians prepare for future challenges their ministry faces.

Yet as the government severs Chinese people’s access to the outside world, the church needs to focus not only on day-to-day operations but also on how China’s current situation presents “an opportunity for better discipleship of the congregation.”

“There may be a day when no tool can climb over the Great Firewall and the Chinese network will become a closed intranet,” Tu said. “When that happens, it seems to me that the help that Christians outside the Great Firewall can provide is limited. So, it is more important that Christians in China can experience spiritual renewal under the current circumstances of persecution.”