



# Prayer for the Persecuted Church for September 27, 2024

## 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, Yan Hwa, Goa Zhisheng, Wang Yi; Hao Zhiwei, Zhang Shaojie, Li Juncai, Lian Xu Liang; ERITREA: Mussia Ezas, Dr. Kifly Gebremeskel, Kidane Weldou, Haile Nayzgi; INDIA: Sarju Prasad, 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 Voice of the Martyrs*

## GLOBAL PRAYER GUIDE

### IRAN

#### OVERVIEW:

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, created the world's only Shiite Islamic theocracy and profoundly changed every aspect of life in Iran. Today, many of those who committed their lives to Islam and Islamic rule are filled with despair. This disillusionment has opened new doors for the gospel, which is sweeping across the nation via Christian media and bold evangelists in Iran's growing house church movements. However, the government continues its attempts to thwart this move of God. Christian leaders and pastors are often arrested, tortured and imprisoned, and their families are harassed. Some, left with no other options, choose to flee the country.

#### MAJOR RELIGION:

More than 97 percent of Iranians are identified by the government as Muslims, but a significant

segment of the population has abandoned Islam, and many have come to faith in Christ.

#### PERSECUTOR:

Christians are persecuted by government authorities, who have networks of informants in each city. Family, friends and community members also persecute Christians, especially when news of a conversion becomes public.

#### WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN IRAN:

The Iranian government is among the most oppressive regimes in the world. It is illegal to leave Islam, and Christians face the constant threat of imprisonment and being falsely charged with "acting against national security" for owning Bibles or even talking about Christ. Christians are routinely fired from their jobs, and it is difficult for a known believer to find a job or rent a home. Many Christians gather in covert fellowships and receive teaching through Christian media smuggled into the country and through broadcast media. Several Christians are currently imprisoned, and many others are under house arrest awaiting sentencing.

### **ACCESS TO BIBLES:**

It is illegal to own, print, import or distribute Bibles. Since they are so difficult to obtain, Bibles are treasured by Iranian believers. Few have their own copy of God's Word.

### **VOM WORK:**

VOM provides encouragement, support and training for former prisoners as they rebuild their lives. We also provide discipleship and leadership training for current and future Christian leaders. VOM is actively involved in smuggling God's Word to believers inside Iran.

### **PRAYER REQUESTS:**

- *Pray that Supreme Leader Ali Hoseini-Khamenei will come to know Christ.*
- *Pray that new Farsi resources will reach children.*
- *Pray for the safety of underground printers involved in the production of Farsi Bibles.*
- *Pray that house church leaders in Iran will reach the country's youth who have lived their entire lives under Islamist oppression.*
- *Pray that Christians imprisoned for their faith will be witnesses in prison.*
- *Pray that Iranians who have dreams and visions will come to faith in Jesus Christ.*
- *Pray for protection for the people smuggling printed and digital Bibles to believers.*
- *Pray for Christian prisoners who feel discouraged and need emotional support.*
- *Pray for creative new strategies to reach more than 60 unreached people groups.*

*From ICC*

## **The Hatred at Home: How a Nigerian Christian Escaped his Family's Attempt to Kill Him**

**9/23/2024 Nigeria**

In Northern Nigeria, where Christian-Muslim tensions run deep, a young man named Salisu Bala made a decision that made his family want to kill him.

Bala grew up in a predominantly Muslim area where Islamic extremists frequently target Christians. Despite this, Bala experienced dreams that he interpreted as divine encounters with Christ. In mid-2023, after sharing his dreams with a Christian friend, Bala secretly converted to Christianity and started attending church.

His newfound faith, however, did not remain hidden for long. In September 2023, Bala's parents discovered he had left Islam and confined him in a room for four days without food or water. His only way out was to renounce his faith in Christ.

- *How to Pray: Pray for Bala as he grows in his walk with Jesus.*
- *Pray for his protection and for him to be a light to his family.*
- *Pray that his family would come to know Christ's love and the truth of the gospel in their own lives.*

## **Chinese American Missionary Released from Beijing Prison**

**09/19/2024 China/United State**

The U.S. Department of State announced this week that the Chinese government has released David Lin, a Christian missionary.

According to NPR, Lin, a 68-year-old naturalized U.S. citizen, moved back to China in 2006. While there, he applied for permission to open a church. Three years later, he was arrested and sentenced to life

in prison for contract fraud, a charge that his family and the State Department believe was unjust.

“We welcome David Lin’s release from prison in the People’s Republic of China,” State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller stated. “He has returned to the United States and reunited with his family for the first time in nearly 20 years.”

- *How to Pray: Pray for Lin’s adjustment to life outside of prison and for his emotional and physical healing.*
- *Pray that he and his family are able to reconnect in a healthy way and that they’re able to enjoy meaningful time together and experience healing as a family.*
- *Pray that Lin’s testimony that he shared while in prison continues to bear fruit in the lives of those who heard it.*

## A Flourishing Church in the Forgotten War

**9/21/2024 Syria**

Although the Syrian war has faded from the headlines after 13 years, the conflict continues — and a smaller yet more committed church remains.

While many people may have forgotten about the conflict, a U.N. commission recently stated that the war is intensifying as war crimes and fears of a larger regional conflict mount.

Although the Christian population in Syria has dwindled, those who remain are insistent on seeing God’s kingdom advance in their homeland. At the start of the conflict, Syria was solidly 8% Christian. Today, only 2% remain.

- *How to Pray: Pray for the believers who remain in Syria to maintain fellowship with each other and to*

*remain bold in their faith as Islamists seek to drive Christians out of the country.*

- *Pray for their protection, health, and financial stability as their country’s ongoing war leads to further chaos and hardship.*
- *Pray that our brothers and sisters in Syria have opportunities to share the gospel with their muslim neighbors.*

## Church Faithfully Worships Outside as Wait for Building Permit Enters 11th Year

**9/18/2024 Indonesia**

Like so many other Sunday mornings, the 600 members of Indonesian Christ Congregation Church-Millennium Peace (GKJI-MD) gathered on an empty plot of land near Kartasura Terminal in Kartasura District, Sukoharjo Regency, this past Sunday. They set up a large tent to shield themselves from the scorching sun and laid mats on the ground to prepare for worship.

While some churches worship outdoors on special occasions, GKJI-MD has done so for 11 years. And it hasn’t been due to a matter of preference. That’s how long it’s been waiting for a building permit.

- *How to Pray: Praise God for the faithfulness of the GKJI-MD congregation, which has waited patiently for Him to provide a permanent structure for them to worship in.*
- *Pray for doors to open, allowing the church to obtain a building permit.*
- *Pray that until that day comes, the church will continue to be a light in its community and continue to share the love of Christ with its neighbors.*

*From Mission Eurasia*

## For this week, please pray for the following:

### **As Ukrainian students return to school this fall, many of them continue to find themselves living in a different country.**

In Poland, displaced Ukrainian children can choose from several options for school. Some take classes online with their Ukrainian school. Some attend Ukrainian schools in Poland, which often means traveling a distance, as this option is only found in a few places. The most common solution is to go to Polish schools and integrate into society. Many children and teens who have visited the New Life Center and have attended our summer Bible camps have shared that they are often put in younger grades because of their language ability, and many of them are bullied. Please pray for these children.

- *Pray that the counselors and youth leaders will minister to these students during this crucial time in their lives. May they find their identity and hope in Jesus Christ.*

**As the war in Gaza continues, the pressing spiritual needs of Israelis also persist.** Our national leaders in the land of Israel are praying and working to open a women's ministry in Rishon LeZion, where women from across the city can find rehabilitation, assistance, and hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. Please join our colleagues in praying for this work, as no other similar ministry yet exists in Israel.

- *Pray for the resources needed to conduct this important outreach, and pray that many women in dire straits will be blessed by these prayerful efforts.*

In the tenth chapter of the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul writes, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not

believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" **Mission Eurasia's national leaders in the country of Kyrgyzstan** are prayerfully working to answer this question. Our colleagues are preparing to publish the Gospel of John in the Kyrgyz language, and will partner with Christian leaders and evangelists throughout the country to deliver these priceless books into the hands of the spiritually needy people of Kyrgyzstan.

- *Please pray for this outreach effort, and pray that many Kyrgyz people will come to believe in Jesus and be saved.*

### **Ilya, our national School Without Walls (SWW) coordinator in Belarus,**

will soon be ordained into pastoral ministry. As Ilya prays and prepares for this important responsibility, please pray for him and his family, and for the SWW teams and volunteers throughout Belarus.

- *Pray for Christians throughout Belarus, that they would reach out to their unbelieving neighbors and loved ones with renewed vigor and prayer.*

## Open Doors Prayer Calendar

### **Mozambique**

#### **September 27**

- *Our field is asking us to pray for our reeling family in northern Mozambique. Extremists launched an attack on the city of Macomia, in Cabo Delgado province, sending people fleeing from their homes.*

#### **September 28**

- *Local partners in the region report the Islamic insurgency is intensifying as Islamic State group-linked attacks increase. Ask God to confuse extremists' plans (Psalm 55:9).*



## September 29

- *Pray for traumatized believers—that God’s Spirit will comfort and provide. Pray they will look to Him for guidance.*

## September 30

- *Pray for pastors ministering to those affected in the attacks and those faithfully serving where they’re vulnerable to attack.*

## North Korea

### October 1

- *An estimated 250,000 Christians are imprisoned for their faith. Ask God to give them hope in the inhumane camps.*

### October 2

- *Pray for at least 10 North Korean Christians who were recently sent to political prison camps. Pray they would know and feel God’s presence.*

### October 3

- *Ask God to surround them with His armies of angels and that they would know His peace that passes all human understanding and guards their hearts and minds (Phil. 4:7).*

## Prayer Focus from Barnabas Aid

### FRIDAY 27

Nearly half the population of Haiti are struggling to feed themselves owing to ongoing violence. Criminal gangs have taken over most of the capital Port-au-Prince and many surrounding agricultural areas. More than half a million people have been forced from their homes, and on average one person is killed or injured every hour.

- *Pray for all Haitians suffering from food shortages and the threat of*

*violence. Ask particularly that the Lord will sustain our brothers and sisters, and that they will bear witness to His goodness through these desperately difficult circumstances.*

### SATURDAY 28

“May God bless you mightily,” said an elderly Christian in Brazil in thanks to Barnabas supporters for sending aid to believers following record flooding in southern Brazil in early 2024. More than 170 were killed and 580,000 displaced in the disaster.

“The scene is like one of war,” said Pastor Daniel as he described the destruction. Barnabas helped to fund the restoration of Pastor Daniel’s flood-ravaged church and provided food and practical aid for around 300 afflicted families.

- *Give thanks that, by God’s grace, our church partners were able to distribute aid to our brothers and sisters in need. Ask that they will lean on the Lord as they restore their homes and communities following these disastrous floods.*

### SUNDAY 29

- *Sovereign Lord, we pray for Your people who have been made homeless by extreme weather events. We pray that You, the God of all comfort, will comfort Christians suffering the effects of floods in Brazil, Kenya and Uganda, for those in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Zambia and other parts of southern Africa affected by prolonged drought, and others whose lives have been devastated by Cyclone Remal in Bangladesh. We pray that You will sustain those most in need and enable Christians to rebuild their lives, for we ask in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)*

## **MONDAY 30**

Canon John Bowers, who died on May 24, 2024, only weeks short of his 92nd birthday, was a tireless champion of suffering Christians around the world. Following his retirement from full-time ministry at the age of 70 in 2002, Canon John, from West Kirby, United Kingdom, embarked on 21 annual cycling pilgrimages, raising more than \$350,000 to help believers in need through the work of Barnabas Aid. Praise God for Canon John's faithful service to our Savior Jesus Christ, and to His persecuted Church. Pray that Canon John's dedication will be an encouragement and an example to others.

## **October**

### **TUESDAY 1**

"We have never held a Bible before today," said "Chesa", a 46-year-old Christian in a remote region of Myanmar. Chesa told our project partner that before this, only her pastor possessed a copy of the Scriptures. Praise God that Barnabas has been able to fund the transportation of 94,000 Bibles in a local language to believers in isolated and impoverished areas of Myanmar. Now, says Chesa, Christians in her village are praying more often, attending church more regularly, and showing love to one another. "God's Word is alive, powerful, and can give peace in our heart," she added. Ask the Lord that our brothers and sisters will continue to find His Word to be a lamp to their feet and a light to their path (Psalm 119:105).

### **WEDNESDAY 2**

Two church buildings in Chin State – a Christian-majority region within Buddhist-majority Myanmar – were destroyed in two airstrikes carried out by the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw). The churches in Lungtak village near the town of Tonzang were hit as the military attempted to drive out rebels from the area. The bombardment also destroyed five houses and caused more than 1,000 residents to flee into nearby forests. Two weeks earlier, Tatmadaw airstrikes on a cottage hospital near Mindat township, also in Chin State, killed five people, including four patients. Pray for an end to airstrikes on churches and hospitals. Pray for God's

comfort for those bereaved, and for protection for Christians throughout Chin State from such attacks.

### **THURSDAY 3**

Church leaders in Bangladesh described themselves as "surprised and worried" after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina repeated the false allegation that Bangladeshi Christians are planning to "carve out a Christian country taking parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar." In a statement the church leaders restated their commitment to the sovereignty of Bangladesh.

"We serve our beloved country Bangladesh in fields of education, health, and human development," added one. Pray that the Christian contribution to nation-building in Bangladesh will continue to be acknowledged, and that believers will be protected from the actions of extremists in Bangladeshi society.

### **FRIDAY 4**

Lift up in prayer six Christians in Tahae village, central Laos, who were arrested at a meeting at the pastor's home on June 22. Along with Pastor Mum, also apprehended were Mr. Liang (aged 40), Mr. Pa (24), Ms. Laen (50), Ms. Lan (23) and Ms. Khoon (28). The group were meeting for prayer in preparation for the following day's Sunday worship. The church of around 40-50 believers had met without harassment until the current village chief was appointed in May, 2024. Pray that the six Christians will be released and that any attempts to prevent the lawful conduct of worship services in Laos will be defeated.

## **Prayer requests from Help the Persecuted**

### **ALAA'S TESTIMONY OF PERSEVERANCE**

Alaa was raised in a Lebanese Muslim family, but when his brother came to faith in Jesus, Alaa began reflecting on his own beliefs and relationship with God.

He had a difficult marriage, and when his wife asked for a divorce, he was devastated. He wondered if maybe his brother's faith might

bring him solace and began exploring the Christian faith. Soon, he found himself drawn to Christ, and he prayed for God to restore his relationship.

As Alaa's faith grew, his brother took him to church, where he was deeply moved by the sermons. It felt as though the message spoke directly to him. He began reading the Bible in secret while attending weekly church meetings. The change in his life became increasingly obvious, and his wife one day asked him, "Where have you been all these years?" The question delighted Alaa, and he shared the gospel with her.

To Alaa's shock, his wife was horrified. She demanded that he leave the home, saying that he was no longer a part of her life. He tried to explain the positive impact of his faith, but she would have none of it and demanded a divorce. She kicked him out of the [home], took his children, spread false accusations about him, and threatened to have him murdered. She sent a group of Muslim clerics to his home, and they robbed him and forced him to finalize the divorce. He escaped and is living in hiding.

However, Alaa remains firm in his faith. He found a new job and is clinging to Acts 16:31, which says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." He has not wavered in his faith, and he refuses to give up praying for his wife's salvation!

Our Field Minister Leila is walking alongside Alaa, ministering to him and helping him find a safe place to call home for a while. Because of your faithful support, we were able to help him pay some lawyer fees associated with his divorce and provide a few month's worth of rent as he begins to rebuild his life.

- *Dear Lord, we lift Alaa to You in prayer, thanking You for the work You have done in his life and the faith You have given him. We ask that You would strengthen Alaa's faith as he faces persecution and hardship. May he feel Your presence and be filled with courage and hope.*

## **PRAYER REQUESTS**

### **THOSE ENDURING ALL FORMS OF SUFFERING FOR THEIR FAITH**

This week, our Field Ministers met with many believers, all of whom were suffering in different ways because they dare to say, "I believe in Jesus Christ." Here is a glimpse into their stories.

#### **Essam, Morocco**

Essam desires to openly declare his faith, but he lives in fear of his family and relatives. If they were to discover his faith, it could cost him his life.

#### **Forough, Iran**

Last week, Forough was arrested by the Iranian government. We don't have detailed information yet, but we believe she was arrested because of her faith in Christ. Our team is actively looking into the situation and will provide updates as we receive more information.

#### **Mustafa, Iraq**

Mustafa was attacked with knives by his Muslim tribe after they found out about his faith and threatened him. He was evicted from his building once it was discovered he had left Islam. Today, he is torn between staying in his hometown or moving to another city, fleeing persecution.

#### **Rafiq, Algeria**

Rafiq, a Christian, is disabled and unable to walk, and his older brother has been caring for his children and meeting all their needs. Recently, his brother traveled to Canada, leaving Rafiq without support. The rest of his family has rejected him and speak harshly against him because of his faith in Christ, and he is asking God to provide the help he needs.

#### **Saiid, Morocco**

Saiid is being persecuted for his faith in Christ. Though he has openly declared his faith, he lives in fear of further persecution and worries about what might happen if he is seen attending a church.

- *Dear Lord, we lift up those suffering for their faith. We pray for Essam, who fears for his life. Give him courage and protection. We ask for Your protection*



*and strength for Forough as she faces imprisonment. We lift Mustafa to You and ask for Your guidance in the decisions he is facing. For Rafiq, who is disabled and rejected by his family, provide for his needs and comfort him with Your presence. We pray for Saiid, who fears further persecution. Strengthen and protect him as he follows You.*

- *Lord, for all these believers, we ask that You would be their refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble, and remind them that they are so deeply loved by You.*

## **ANSWERED PRAYERS**

### **BABAK, IRAN**

Babak was born and raised in a Muslim family and had a good relationship with them, growing up in the way of Islam. When his brother was killed in the Iran-Iraq war, Babak was devastated. In his search for peace, he began using drugs and quickly became addicted. His addiction consumed his life, affecting his marriage and family, as his sole focus became obtaining drugs for daily use.

After years of struggling, Babak desperately wanted to break free from his addiction but had no one to help him. One day, he heard a Christian pastor, Parsa, on a Christian TV network speaking about Christ's love, His power to free people from captivity, and His forgiveness for everyone. These words deeply resonated with Babak, who had been distant from God for many years. After hearing this, Babak called the network, and Parsa prayed with him. Soon, Babak gave his life to Christ. He told Qasem, "God did a miracle in my life. I was cured of my addiction and gave my heart to Jesus Christ. God healed and changed my body and soul; my relationship with my wife improved and God also saved my family. He gave me the true peace that I had been trying for years to achieve with drugs."

Babak faced intense persecution in Iran after converting to Christianity, including multiple arrests by the Intelligence Service. He was imprisoned for a year, where he continued to share the gospel despite the harsh conditions. After his release, he was constantly threatened and forbidden from engaging in Christian activities.

Babak fled to Turkey with his family. Over the years, he established Persian-speaking churches. To earn an income, he wanted to open a tourism business and café for Christian groups. Thanks to your support, we helped provide some seed funding for the business, which is operating now and off to a great start! Qasem recently checked on Babak to see how he was doing, and he said, "I want to thank you for all the love and help you've given us. This support allowed us to start our work, and now my family members and I are working together. I feel so blessed to work alongside my family. Thank you, and God bless you, Help The Persecuted."

- *Dear Lord, we thank You for Babak's journey of faith and for bringing him from darkness into the light of Your love. We praise You for freeing him from the chains of addiction! Lord, we ask that You would bless his business and encourage him as he continues walking with You!*

*From Christianity Today*

## **Middle East Muslims are Finding Jesus. Can They Fit Within a Weakened Church?**

### **JAYSON CASPER**

Lausanne report tells global body of believers that there is hope beyond the headlines, as old and new Christians carry forward an apostolic-era testimony to the world.

In the Arab world today, the war in Gaza dominates the news, with its small Palestinian Christian community caught in the crossfire. But over the last decade, ancient churches have faced persecution in



Syria and Iraq, while political instability and terrorism have threatened believers in Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Nevertheless, the church's activity in this region is about much more than war and persecution, as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) chapter of the Lausanne Movement's State of the Great Commission report shows. For example, congregations have cared for refugees, and online ministries have expanded.

***One notable development is the numerical growth of Muslim-background believers (MBBs).***

The report provides an ominous description of Christianity in the MENA region: "The outlook for all Christian communities is negative." Yet the section on MBBs concludes with hope amid the devastation, predicting that "a new church, from among the majority people, will rise up from the ashes of the traditional structures."

CT spoke with Rafik Barsoum—coauthor of the MENA chapter, president of Message to All Nations, and pastor of a digital church initiative launched in 2022—to elaborate on key ideas in the report. He described the difficulties faced by MBBs and Christian-background believers (CBBs) alike, the witness offered by both, and why he dislikes the distinction between them.

***Why did the report begin with a negative assessment?***

Iraq, for example, is nearly bereft of Christians. The region is experiencing war, famine, terrorism, poverty, instability, and turmoil in every way. And with any turmoil anywhere, minorities are the first to be affected. In nearly every nation, if they are not facing outright persecution, struggles such as these pressure believers to leave the region.

Ancient churches are losing their people. The Middle East was once the beacon of Christian history; now it is at risk of losing its Christian presence.

But these struggles do not suggest a gloomy picture as concerns the work of Christ. We have seen signs of revival in the last decade

like never before. But a price has been paid for it that is not often covered by the news or political analysis. We do not want this persecution to continue, but new signs of hope are emerging.

***One of these signs of hope is the MBB community, which the report calls a "movement."***

The word movement is a missiological term describing an intangible awareness that God is drawing people to himself in ways we cannot explain, beyond the work of any one church or organization. It is as Jesus told Nicodemus: The wind blows where it will, and we see its effects in the wave that is forming. People are coming to know the truth through dreams and visions, the work of missionaries, the testimony of the church, and online media ministry.

Amid political turmoil, people are challenging taboos and delusions of the past— independently of this movement, but also as they witness Christian love in action. God is doing something unique.

***Yet the report calls this movement "small." How should it be measured?***

The MBB movement is small compared to our aspirations.

We want to see more even as we cannot grasp its true size; only eternity will reveal it. We love to assess numbers for encouragement and evaluation. But while we do our due diligence, we should err on the side of caution in any calculations. After all, Jesus compared the kingdom to a mustard seed, small in appearance but great in significance.

***But I have a more serious concern to raise about MBB and CBB terminology.***

I come from a family in Egypt that traces its roots back to the time of Christ. And we were among the first evangelicals when missionaries came from the West. But classifying believers based on what background they come from is not healthy in the long term.

We all have different backgrounds—except for our shared experience of sin and death.

Without Christ we are lost, and with him we are saved unto abundant life. We acknowledge that the MBB community has distinct features, but we strongly encourage people not to divide the body of Christ into categories. In the past 15 centuries, the Muslim world has never seen so many testimonies emerging as now. Yet our report does not intend to isolate them from the broader Christian scene; they are implicitly recognized in every description.

Our role as CBBs especially is to de-label us all as we emphasize unity.

***Many MBBs worship separately from other Christians. Is this appropriate?***

It depends on the circumstances.

In many places, separate worship is necessary due to security concerns, familial and social pressures, or prejudice from either side. In other settings, it is possible for MBBs and CBBs to meet together. But in all cases, we are one in Christ and united in heaven. We cannot advise against separate MBB meetings, but we emphasize our ontological solidarity.

Joint fellowship can be decided only at the local level. We do not live in an ideal world, but biblically speaking, there is no Jew or Gentile, no MBB or CBB. I want our ecclesiology to be correct in principle, but I would allow for different expressions, as we have to do what's possible when the ideal is elusive.

I challenge both MBBs and CBBs to think of one another as beloved peers. We are building the kingdom of God together, united forever in eternity. We might as well dissolve our differences now.

***How else is life challenging for MBBs?***

The Muslim world is very diverse, from strict fundamentalist contexts with high persecution to more modern and secular contexts that allow for more variation—at least in theory. Persecution exists on a scale.

Many MBBs have lost their jobs, property, and inheritance. They face family dissolution. Their children get assigned to Islamic rather than Christian education in school when their family names indicate their Muslim

background. Women are often more affected, as they have less social protection.

But there is also a challenge that comes from MBBs' understanding of identity. Faith is intertwined with who they are, not just a system of belief as in many Western countries. In the Eastern mentality, I am because we are. It is not just a matter of changing their religion but of being detached from their roots. It is a major psychological challenge to come to Christ, and this factor is not easily addressed.

I admire the courage of our MBB friends and rejoice in the grace God gives them. Many are maturing in their faith and assuming servant-leadership roles in the church.

***The report also cited their courage, specifically regarding MBBs' "public embrace" of faith. Amid persecution, is it necessary for them to proclaim their Christianity?***

This is a contentious issue in missions circles. But Jesus said, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32). And Jesus said the same about denial. Following Christ comes with a cost. He was rejected, and we will be rejected, but he has overcome the world.

I cannot speak on behalf of MBBs because I am from a context where I can declare my faith in Christ. How to do it wisely is a different question, and there is no general answer. If new Christians are to grow in Christ, they must be surrounded by a wise group of mature believers who walk the journey with them. This is the role of the body of Christ. Those in the church understand the context and are the ones God uses to provide advice.

But each new believer must get to a place where they confess Christ publicly.

***The report celebrates that CBBs are also bold in sharing their faith.***

Their witness goes beyond direct evangelizing. This last decade witnessed the martyrdom of Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya who refused to renounce their faith under ISIS. And when the Muslim Brotherhood regime was

overthrown in Egypt, the church responded in love and forgiveness as it stood for the truth. It is good to be bold, yet we must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

The church faces clear evidence of opposition.

What is happening now is a continuation of one of the main contributions of Christians from the MENA region to the global body of Christ. Local believers have been standing with Jesus since the apostles started the church. Athanasius, a fourth-century bishop from Alexandria, was told, “The whole world is against you.” He replied, “Yes, but I am against the world.”

We have our blemishes, but we have withstood persecution.

***How likely is it that one who shares their faith will be persecuted?***

It is certainly possible. We have to stress wisdom, wise counsel, and accountability to the local church—especially for foreign missionaries, who, if working independently, can sometimes do more harm than good. In some places, witnessing will be overlooked. In others, it may result in questioning by the state police. Social discrimination is possible. So are surveillance and imprisonment.

People in the MENA region take religion very seriously.

But we are seeing that if Arab believers live a Christlike example and describe how their way of life stems from their personal faith, people want to ask them more. This pattern of inviting inquiry removes many social barriers and gives Christians near immunity from security services. And most importantly, it paves the way for the gospel to be understood and relevant.

***Another positive trend in the report celebrates greater cooperation between Christian denominations.***

Cooperation is definitely improving. Christians of different denominations

can sit together and listen to each other, whereas we used to build animosity upon assumptions. My prayer is that this growing communication will develop further into understanding each other and working together. One sign of hope is that several leaders have demonstrated love to one another.

Evangelicals have long been seen by people in the Catholic and Orthodox denominations as infidels or as wolves who steal sheep. But now that we are in communication, they see that we love Christ and want to serve his kingdom—not destroy their churches. This alone is a great result.

***MBBs are a sign of revival. Might all Middle Eastern churches rise again?***

Beyond those of a Muslim background, we see new expressions of faith in the digital church. And mature believers are emerging from all demographics, young and old, liturgical and charismatic. But the essentials are love for Christ, love for truth, and love for holiness—amid all that we witness in our world today. Unless the church stands on these pillars, all hope is superficial.

There is so much to anticipate for our region, built on the foundation of those who have gone before. The outlook does not have to stay negative.

The administration, U.S. rights groups and lawmakers on the Hill continue to call for the release of other Americans still wrongfully held in China, including businessman Kai Li, who is being held on alleged espionage-related charges, and Mark Swidan, who was sentenced on drug charges.

Nelson Wells Jr. and Dawn Michelle Hunt have also been “wrongfully imprisoned” over alleged drug-related charges, according to the Dui Hua Foundation, a U.S.-based human rights group that focuses on political prisoners and other at-risk detainees.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*