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Christian Today Website Articles

Unless otherwise stated, articles in this magazine are transcriptions of material selected by the editor at Christian Today and were first published recently on www.christiantoday.com.

Church leaders plead with Home Secretary to save Christian family from deportation

Church leaders have signed a letter to the Home Secretary pleading with him to save two teenage boys and their parents from being deported back to Pakistan.

The Bakhsh family fled to Scotland after their close friends, pastors Rashid

Emmanuel and Sajid were gunned down outside a court in Faisalabad in 2010. They were killed despite being in police custody as they stood trial for blasphemy after being accused of writing a pamphlet criticising the Prophet Muhammad.

Maqsood Bakhsh fled with his wife Parveen and their two young sons, 15-year-old Somer and 13-year-old Areeb, to Glasgow in 2012 after receiving death threats from Islamic extremists.

The family fears that if they are forced to go back to Pakistan, they are at risk of being murdered because of their Christian faith and friendship with the slain pastors.

Their bids for asylum have been repeatedly turned down by the UK Government and they now face deportation back to Pakistan, where

Christians suffer intense persecution for their faith.

The Church of Scotland, which has been campaigning on behalf of the family, said the applications for asylum had been turned down because government officials do not believe the family would be at risk if they moved to a different part of Pakistan away from their home in Faisalabad.

However, Mr Bakhsh insists that once Christians are targeted by extremists, nowhere is safe to live.

The Rt Rev Susan Brown, Moderator of the Church of Scotland General Assembly, is now pleading with Home Secretary Sajid Javid to re-examine the Bakhsh family's case.

In an open letter also signed by 13 former Moderators and the leaders of other denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church and Scottish

Episcopal Church, she warned of the ‘Pakistan-wide threat’ that the family faces if they are forced to leave the UK.

‘The family is a Christian one in a country where such faith constitutes a tiny minority of the whole population,’ she said.

‘As you will be aware, the blasphemy laws in Pakistan are such that even without substantive evidence, accusations can be made against those not of the Muslim faith.

‘Petty disagreements between neighbours for example, can result in people of another faith being accused under the law and lead to their imprisonment or being pursued with the intent to kill.

‘This is precisely the reason why this faithful Christian family find themselves in Scotland.’

Mrs Brown went on to say that Somer and Areeb are ‘a credit to Scotland, to our education system and along with their parents, have so much to offer our land’.

Mr Bakhsh was a data analyst in Pakistan before fleeing to Scotland, while his wife was a trained midwife with 17 years of experience. However, due to their uncertain status in the UK, they have been unable to work and have had to rely on benefits and charity.

Mrs Brown said the Bakhsh family wanted to contribute their skills to Scotland.

‘Suffice to say, they are people who long to give – and they are people who have so much to offer,’ she said.

‘With all respect, we urge you and through you, the Home Office, to step in and allow this family to play their part

in serving a nation they very much feel a part of and want to contribute to.'

Somer and Areeb, who attend Springburn Academy in Glasgow, have both spoken of their desire to remain in Scotland.

Somer said he considered Scotland as his home

'I love Scotland and I do not want to go back to Pakistan. The thought of it terrifies me and it is very stressful to even imagine going back there,' he said.

'I wouldn't have a future and I can't even read or write Urdu. I want to live here in Scotland, it is my country and my home.'

Areeb expressed similar concerns: 'I am so happy living in Scotland and I am scared to go back to Pakistan.

'I am really afraid and I can't imagine living a normal life there. I am so happy

living here, I am getting the right education and our lives are not under threat.'

The family attend Possilpark Parish Church in Glasgow, where they are being supported by minister, the Rev Linda Pollock.

She said: 'I hope that the Home Office will re-examine the family's case, stop treating them as numbers and acknowledge them as human beings because they have so much to give to Scotland.

'It is my wish that the Home Secretary and his colleagues will share the wisdom, compassion and good sense of all those who have signed the petition to keep Somer and Areeb in the UK.'

A petition urging the Home Secretary to grant asylum to the Bakhsh family has been signed by over 88,000 people.

The plea to the Home Secretary coincides with a visit to the UK by another Pakistani Christian family experiencing persecution.

The husband and daughter of Asia Bibi have been in the UK on a visit hosted by Aid to the Church in Need to raise awareness of her plight as she fights a death sentence for blasphemy.

The Pakistani Supreme Court reached a verdict on Bibi's appeal this week but has reserved announcing the decision publicly until a later date.

The British Pakistani Christian Association is calling upon the UK Government to grant the family asylum in the event of her release.

North Korea should open up its notorious prison camps for inspection, not only nuclear sites

Kim Jong-un has signalled his readiness to allow inspectors into the dismantled Punggye-ri nuclear test site, but Open Doors USA is urging North Korea's Supreme Leader to go further.

The organisation, which advocates for persecuted Christians worldwide, said the communist country's moves towards denuclearisation were a 'step in the right direction' but voiced concern that 'little has been said' in talks between the US and North Korea about the country's decades-long 'severe human rights violations'.

It wants North Korea to allow the Red Cross and United Nations Council of

Inquiry in to inspect the camps, which it says are ‘as bad – or even worse – than Auschwitz’.

According to Open Doors USA, there are 250,000 North Koreans imprisoned in the camps, including 50,000 prisoners of faith.

‘We must gain transparency into how these people are being treated,’ says Open Doors CEO David Curry. ‘And then President Trump must make it clear that Kim Jong Un can only be invited back into the world’s good graces, and be lauded for political gestures if he commits to resolving decades of human rights violations at the hands of his regime.’

Following a meeting between Kim and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Pyongyang on Sunday, South Korean President Moon Jae-in said a second summit meeting between North Korea

and the US was being planned for ‘as early as possible’.

President Moon also revealed that Kim was open to a visit from Pope Francis, a surprising announcement given North Korea’s poor track record on religious freedom and the fact that it currently has no formal diplomatic ties with the Vatican.

Open Doors USA questioned the invitation, saying, ‘How can a dictator who uses the fear of Nazi-style prison camps to rule his people sincerely extend a visit to the Pope?’

North Korea has come under fire over prison conditions after missionary Kenneth Bae was sentenced to 15 years of hard labour in 2013. He revealed how he was frequently hospitalized as a result of the harsh conditions in the prison camp. After diplomatic efforts by the US, he was freed in 2014.

Last year, the death of Otto Warmbier after 17 months in detention in North Korea caused international outcry. Warmbier, a 22-year-old student, died days after being returned to the US brain-damaged and in a coma. North Korean officials said botulism was to blame.

Open Doors USA said: ‘Otto’s death serves as a disturbing reflection of Kim’s disregard for human life and human rights that continues to characterise and define the communist country.’

The organisation is calling on the world’s Christians to join in prayer for the suffering church in North Korea and an end to human rights abuses there.

‘The thought of 50,000 North Korean believers imprisoned for their faith being freed from the gates of these camps and their inhumane living

conditions should drive the world's 2.2 billion Christians to their knees,' it said.

'We have a biblical responsibility to intercede for these believers and ask God to make it clear to our leaders that the time is now—for such a time as this—to start this unprecedented freedom work for His suffering people.'

Church minister reports Scotland's hate crime posters for being a hate crime

A church minister has reported the Scottish Government's hate crime posters to the campaign's own website over concerns that they are doing more to encourage hate than prevent it.

David Robertson, minister of St Peter's Free Church in Dundee, said the posters

produced jointly by the Scottish Government and Police Scotland were an ‘absolute contradiction’.

The posters are part of the One Scotland campaign promoting a ‘truly inclusive’ society ‘where equality and human rights are respected and every individual and minority group feels valued’, the campaign website says.

The Police Scotland website describes hate crime as ‘any criminal offence committed against an individual or property that is motivated by a person’s hatred of someone because of his or her actual or perceived race, religion, transgender identity, sexual orientation or disability’.

The One Scotland posters display messages warning that people who commit hate crimes will be reported to the police. The accompanying campaign

website includes a tab that allows visitors to report suspected hate crimes.

While the website identifies verbally abusing people for their religious beliefs as an example of a hate crime, one of the campaign posters suggests bigots are people of faith.

The ‘Dear Bigots’ poster reads: ‘Division seems to be what you believe in. We don’t want your religious hate on our buses, on our streets and in our communities. We don’t want you spreading your intolerance.’

The message on the poster is signed off: ‘End of sermon. Yours, Scotland.’

Mr Robertson has now reported the poster to the Scottish police, saying that it actually encourages hate against Christians.

‘By your own criteria your posters, especially the one on religion is a hate

incident. I perceive it as being motivated by hate and prejudice,' he said.

'Why? In my day-to-day life I experience a great deal of anti-Christian prejudice, fuelled by ignorance and prejudice. Your poster will just add to that. You imply that it is religious people who are responsible for what you call homophobia and transphobia.'

Mr Robertson said he regularly receives hate mail for his Christian views and said that the prejudice against Christians had reached the point where some are 'scared' to admit going to church.

'Your poster only legitimises these attitudes and that hatred. It is based on ignorance and prejudice,' he said.

'The language of the poster is that of hatred, anger, prejudice, exclusion and intimidation. There is within it the

implicit threat, if not of violence, at least of criminal prosecution.

‘The poster is designed quite deliberately to mock and to stir up prejudice against religious people but especially Christians.’

He added: ‘At best what you are doing is virtue signalling – at worst it encourages hateful behaviour. You don’t encourage love by promoting hatred of religion.’

Christian Concern has created three alternative posters defending freedom of speech and telling One Scotland that ‘stereotyping religious people as hateful bigots is deeply disturbing – even hateful’.

Access for all: How a Christian woman's vision is opening the Lake District to disabled people

A Christian woman is campaigning to change the landscape of disability at a World Heritage site.

When the 885 square miles of the English Lake District National Park was awarded UNESCO World Heritage status in 2017, Julia Walker was already experiencing a powerful prompting from God. She said: 'I knew God's vision was big. The north Lake District mountains are not accessible for everybody, and they need to be for everybody.'

As a young mum Julia developed a serious medical condition which robbed her of the active outdoor life she and husband Murray had once enjoyed

together. It was while spending several years confined to a wheelchair, feeling sad and grieving for the beautiful world she had loved and lost, that God began a new work in her.

Physically, she became intensely aware of the daily challenges of disability. Spiritually, she became intensely aware of God's great love, not just for her, but for every weak and vulnerable person.

Major surgery eventually put Julia back on her feet, albeit with limited mobility, and her life returned to some degree of normality. However, it was during her season in the desert that God prepared the ground to plant a seed within her heart. It's now beginning to bear fruit.

Encouraged by a friend, began researching the idea of setting up a charity. She hoped to provide all-terrain mobility scooters, known as trampers, to enable those with limited

mobility to access the mountains. As she began to speak to relevant organisations she felt God prompt her to approach Living Options Devon, a charity which empowers disabled people. Julia says: 'Neil Warren at Living Options believed and trusted in what I wanted to do. We set up Skype meetings and eventually went on to partner with them, along with other agencies. I just found out this year that Neil is a Christian. I very much believe that God opens doors and God closes doors.'

In April 2017 Lake District Mobility was granted charitable status. In May 2018 the first site was launched at Whinlatter, in the north west of the English Lake District. Whinlatter has unrivalled views across a dramatic landscape that has inspired many of the world's greatest artists, writers and thinkers. Lake District Mobility is

currently auditing two new sites, with plans to add a further four.

Julia believes strongly in the benefits and blessings of the great outdoors and wants to see the physically less-able getting out into God's creation. She says: 'When someone is unwell it can often mean that the whole family stays at home and everyone's fitness is reduced. One of our regular users has MS. Now he can take his dog for a walk and the whole family have increased their activity levels. His wife can walk more and the children can get out on their bikes.'

All-terrain scooters, or trampers, offer a different experience from being pushed in a wheelchair. Trampers can travel at the average walking speed of two to four miles an hour. They are extremely simple to operate and full training is given. The user is in full control and can lead, follow, stop or go

as and when they like. The tramper brings social benefits too, Julia says: ‘There’s a freedom in it, because you’re sitting higher up, you’re at eye level with other adults, and can feel more part of the group. If you’re age 14 or over and something stops you from going up a mountain then it’s for you. Come and use it for a few minutes. If you don’t like it that’s fine, but if you do, then go and have fun. You’re the one in control of it!’

She adds: ‘We offer a taster membership for £2.50, because people in pain don’t always know what the after-effects are going to be. Annual membership is £10 and that’s literally how much it costs for us to process the forms. For that you can use the tramper as many times as you can book it. When I set this up I was determined it should be as inexpensive as possible.’

When Lake District Mobility allocates a tramper to a host site its also undertakes a thorough audit of the disabled facilities and issues its recommendations in a detailed report. Julia says: ‘God thinks about everything in everybody’s life, including the difficulties that people with limited mobility have. When people visit those sites and go out on the tramper, I want them to know that someone cares about the detail of their experience; that God cares.’

As Julia speaks boldly about her hopes for the future it’s very easy to forget that she’s a young woman with a history of mental health problems, severe dyslexia, and in her earlier life was the victim of some serious bullying. She has no GCSE’s, no A-levels, no degree and low self-esteem, yet within her broken frame she has the beating heart of a warrior. She says: ‘I believed I could

do pretty much nothing, but my friend believed in me and told me I could do it. God tells me to do something and I just do it, but it scares me witless, and I just pray and then do it. I find the whole concept that I actually run a charity absolutely wild but I know that with God anything is possible.'

Evangelists preparing for major mission push across the UK in 2020

Evangelists are laying the ground for a major evangelistic push in 2020 that is aimed at raising up a new generation of Christians across the UK who are equipped to share the Gospel.

Advance 2020 is a major conference being held two years from now to commission hundreds of evangelists for

the work of sharing the Gospel around the country.

A conference held this week at Lambeth Palace, the official residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, brought together a hundred evangelists and ministry leaders to pray and plan for the effort.

One of the key figures in the initiative is Andy Hawthorne, founder of The Message Trust, who said the inspiration was the words in Isaiah 60, ‘Arise, shine, for your light has come.’

‘God was saying “step out in faith and do some big reaping events again”,’ said Hawthorne.

While Hawthorne has been at the forefront of evangelism in the UK for the last 25 years, he said he felt that God was calling him to release younger evangelists.

He said the goal for him and the 11 other mentors serving as part of Advance 2020 is to produce disciples who have a high level of accountability.

Mentoring and accountability groups have already been established in anticipation of Advance 2020, in which young Christians are being supported in the calling of evangelism.

There are now 45 groups of men and women being mentored, numbering around 400 evangelists in total. They are meeting and praying together regularly ahead of the conference to support one another as they grow in their calling to preach and bring people to the faith.

The mentoring initiative includes 11 to 18-year-olds, who will get their first taste of evangelism at the Youth Evangelism Weekender taking place from 30 November to 2 December 2018.

Speaking at the Lambeth Palace meeting, Hawthorne challenged the next generation of evangelists to ‘think big’.

‘What would it look like for us to step up for a year – if we were to multiply the gift of evangelist to proclaim Christ to 500,000 young people in that year; if we do this together, praying for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit through word and deed mission; if we are spurring one another on; recommissioning the gift of the evangelist; believing for the nation to be changed in a year?’ he said.

Hawthorne is challenging evangelists to work together and start their own Advance 2020 groups to bring to the conference taking place in October 2019.

He expects around 2,000 evangelists to be re-commissioned at the summit for a ‘reaping year’ in 2020.

Supporting Advance 2020 are Roy Crowne from HOPE, Gavin Calver from the Evangelical Alliance, Dr Rachel Jordan-Wolf from the Church of England, Rev Canon Yemi Adedeji from HOPE, and Dave Plowman and Wendy Palau from the Luis Palau Association.

‘Guardians of civilisations’: Why the Middle East needs Christians

Life for Christians in the Middle East today has been hugely impacted by war. Parts of the region have been emptied of Christians entirely. In other places, they are clinging on, reduced in number and deeply insecure. There’s nowhere that hasn’t felt the effects of conflict, whether directly as armies and militias have fought through their homes and

villages, or indirectly as refugees and internally displaced persons have crowded into camps offering food and shelter – no matter how inadequate these often are.

But the story across the region is far more complex than is often told. While in some places Christians are harried and persecuted, in others they are able to minister to those in need.

Over-simplifying a complicated landscape is a besetting sin of the West, with consequences that will last for generations.

Michel Constantin is regional director of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association/Pontifical Mission, overseeing programmes in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Egypt from his base in Beirut. Now 55, he's lived in Lebanon all his life and is intimately acquainted with the life of Christians in the Middle East through CNEWA/PM's mission to

build up the church, alleviate poverty and inspire hope. On a recent visit to the UK with Embrace the Middle East, he tells Christian Today that Christians there need security, they need someone to speak for them in the corridors of power, and they need people there alongside them during the long road to recovery.

He speaks of Iraq, where ‘Christians are considered a defeated people.’ Regarded as supporters of the Saddam Hussein regime, many of them have been displaced multiple times, from Basra, to Nineveh, to Erbil, to Nineveh again.

From nearly 1.5 million in 2004, the Christian population is down to less than 300,000 now. ‘The result is that they are diminishing in political presence and weight, they are getting lighter and lighter,’ says Constantin. ‘It was their dream 10 years ago that they could ask for an autonomous province in

the Nineveh Valley. But now they're a minority even there. They are getting weaker and weaker.

'The people I meet would all like to leave Iraq.'

He stresses that CNEWA/PM, like other Christian organisations, wants to 'accompany them and respect their choices, and try to improve the quality of the services for them'. But, he says: 'I am very pessimistic about any large-scale return. The society is corrupted and divided among Muslim communities and ethnic communities – these are deadly conflicts and Christians are a very small minority, and can't change anything. It is not an equal contest.'

In Syria, beginning to see an end to another ruinous war, the situation is different.

‘Christians have suffered the consequences of the war, but they didn’t have to leave their homes or their churches – no one took their homes or their properties,’ Constantin says. ‘The war is very harsh, many left for Lebanon, France or Europe. But the regime is the winner. Christians were never against the regime.’ For the most part, he says, Christians – like everyone else – suffer from the quality of services and the shattering of the economy.

‘There are 5-6 million Syrians outside Syria. The most qualified people left, it’s hard to return.

‘I think it will be a long process, reconstruction – not one night. And the international fundraising fatigue makes the misery longer.

‘In Syria, we try to give hope to those who remain, and improve the quality of

their lives – with electricity, medical facilities and supplies. Sixty per cent of the hospitals in Syria are out of business.’

Fear, poverty, the sheer difficulty of life with a collapsed infrastructure and the lack of any clear hope of a future have driven the refugee outflow. In Lebanon and Jordan, the number of refugees is almost half the population.

Constantin’s own country of Lebanon has responded to the flood of refugees with extraordinary generosity. ‘It is a very small country with a very small economy,’ he says. Usually Lebanese people emigrate from Lebanon to the West – around 4 million Lebanese live there, but there are 17 million outside the country, 7 million of them in Brazil. And yet it has 2 million refugees, including many from Syria. ‘The burden is very heavy. The local infrastructure is

in bad shape from the civil war – we don't have electricity, water, sewage.

'The Syria war is why the situation is so unfortunate. Refugees are not in regular camps. They are in every village – there are 36,000 refugee settlements, with people living in tents.'

Unregulated and undocumented, he says, 'They are competing for work with poor Lebanese people. Wages are going down.'

While each country has been impacted by deadly and destructive conflicts, each bears the weight of its own history and faces its own political and social challenges – and this, too, is an issue for Christians, because it makes it very difficult to speak with a unified voice. As Constantin says: 'The West has fragmented over doctrine and theology. In the East it is over political issues.' And such is the force of identity politics

in the region, he says, ‘Even if there was one voice, they would hardly be heard.’

In Iraq, the extremist vision of an East without Christians has already come to pass. And Constantin stresses that this is a tragedy not just for Christians, but for the world.

The Church in the Middle East is very different from Europe. The churches are not only religious, they are also the guardians of civilisations,’ he says. The ancient Syriac language is preserved in the church; Assyrians and Chaldeans still form living communities in Iraq; in Egypt, it is the Christian Copts that are the link to the Pharaonic past.

‘The Middle East without Christians would be much poorer,’ Constantin says. Minorities – Christians everywhere, Yazidis in Iraq, Druze, Shia Muslims in Egypt all need protection if they are to flourish. And hence his call for aid:

Christians need ‘someone to talk for them’, representation in places where the decisions are made that will affect them; they need practical help of the kind CNEWA/PM helps to deliver, ‘to be accompanied in their daily lives, to improve their lives – and long-term help, not just help to cover an immediate emergency. And with other minorities, in many places they need protection. ‘There is no umbrella for the Christians in Iraq, or for any of the minorities. There is no protection against aggression, there are no observers.’

The vision of a Middle East depopulated of Christians is a bleak one. But it is not the whole story. Constantin and people like him are working to support those who remain, to strengthen them in their life and witness on the front line of faith.