

GLOBAL CHRISTIAN RELIEF

# 10 PERSECUTION TRENDS TO WATCH

An all-new list that shines a spotlight on significant examples of Christian persecution today.





## INTRODUCTION

Around the globe, millions of persecuted believers endure staunch opposition to their faith and brazen attacks on religious freedom. In the following pages, Global Christian Relief invites the Body of Christ to learn about the top 10 persecution trends impacting our vulnerable brothers and sisters today.

Then, please join us in reciting a short collection of prayers to strengthen and sustain our persecuted family.

# 1

## Suppression via Technology

Under President Xi Jinping, the Chinese government has succeeded in reducing the attractiveness of Christianity in China—effectively isolating and fracturing the church.

China's Christian minority has now stalled to just 2-3% of the total population, according to a recent Pew Center report. But the data, based on government statistics, may be highly inaccurate due to the Communist party's strong disapproval of religion. Indeed, the Chinese government treats religion—including Christianity—as a security threat. Bible apps and thousands of Christian websites have been blocked; one cannot even access a single hymn on the Internet in China. With sophisticated surveillance, including the use of artificial intelligence and facial recognition technology, China's 135 million Christians face a level of control not seen before.

Christian schools and programs for minors have been banned. Christian citizens are emigrating from China to other nations. Churches in cities are now difficult to find. The churches that remain are becoming informal and decentralized to avoid government crackdowns; for example, even house churches have split into smaller groups to evade the watchful eyes of the government. And China is now influencing other authoritarian regimes to adopt policies and technology that negatively impact Christian minorities.

# 2

## Violent Nationalist Ideologies

In India, the Hindu nationalist government continues to sever the lifeline of the Indian church with the global church.

Hindu extremists regained power in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In two terms, India's 70 million Christians have seen hate normalized, education and media taken over, and institutions hollowed out. Violence against Christians in India has increased substantially, especially in the northeastern state of Manipur. While the causes are complex in nature, in 2023, thousands of believers from the Kuki tribe were displaced amid strife with Hindu extremists, ultimately leading to ethnic segregation.

The ruling BJP political party government started refusing licenses for charities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to receive foreign funds under the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act. More than 19,000 NGOs and counting have lost licenses—mostly Christian and Muslim groups—shutting down social and educational work and effectively preventing the global church from rendering aid to the Indian church.

The BJP also sold media and education sectors to business elites who promote its Hindu nationalist agenda. Two billionaire friends of Modi control 82% of Indian media, significantly restricting press freedom.

# 3

## The Growth of Islamic Extremism

In the Sahel region of Africa, violence keeps rising as Islamic insurgencies mushroom and take advantage of states becoming more fragile.

Extremism has been steadily growing in Africa. In the late 1990s, several northern Nigerian states declared themselves under Sharia law, defying the constitution. In 2002, militant groups like Boko Haram emerged. After the 2011 collapse of Libya, Middle Eastern extremists and arms flowed south into fragile African states. This sparked Islamist insurgencies, displacing Christians in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

By 2023, Islamists controlled 40% of Burkina Faso, affecting over 1 million Christians. And Nigerian believers continue to suffer recurring acts of violence at the hands of Fulani Muslim herders and Boko Haram. A root cause is the lack of education and jobs, especially for younger people, which drives recruitment into extremist groups. The church provides vital education in the region, and sustaining this could temper violence and bring stability to the region. However, with Islamic extremism currently entrenched across the region, the situation for African Christians remains perilous.

# 4

## Heightened Propaganda & Disinformation

The explosion of state-controlled media and technology fans persecution by spreading old lies in new ways.

According to GCR's Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, there are four types of common lies told in countries opposed to Christianity. One involves nationalistic lies, for example, "You are not Indian if you are Christian." Another is a familial lie often heard in places like the Middle East, such as, "You dishonor your Muslim parents if you follow Christ." Criminal lies often ensue in places like Pakistan, where believers are falsely accused of blasphemy: "Christians are guilty of terrible crimes." And lastly, there are extremist lies, for example, "Christians are violent and evil, so we must kill them first."

Today, authoritarian governments like that of North Korea are harnessing media to spread its disinformation campaigns with greater reach and effectiveness. Consider a recent report about North Korean propaganda on YouTube, which falsely depicts life in North Korea as affluent, comfortable and free of censorship—despite the fact that in reality, millions suffer from poverty, and books like the Bible are considered treasonous. In closed nations, the proliferation of lies about Christians through state-controlled media serves to isolate, dehumanize and justify violence against them. The church must work to counter disinformation with facts and free speech to preserve truth, regain trust and defend persecuted faith communities.

# 5

## The Weaponization of Religion

Around the world, religion is increasingly being co-opted to justify violence in God's name.

For an example of this persecution trend, look no further than the war between Russia and Ukraine, where the Russian Orthodox Church is being utilized to justify the conflict from a religious perspective. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, a bishop in the Orthodox Church and a close ally of Russian president Vladimir Putin, has declared that Russia's invasion is a Holy War. Furthermore, he described Ukraine as infested with evil forces, secretly referring to the Jewish minority population. An anonymous Orthodox priest commented, "Putin gave the Russian Orthodox Church its lands back ... now it owes him, and he is not bashful to call in the favor."

This weaponization of religion harms Christianity in both Russia and Ukraine. Russian Orthodox leaders betray Christ by sanctifying violence and scapegoating minorities. In Ukraine, hundreds of religious buildings were reduced to rubble, including centuries-old churches. Meanwhile, too many observers miss the religious dimensions of the conflict. The Russian state exploits faith to sanctify its militarism and expansionism beyond Ukraine; several African nations now look to Russia's Wagner mercenaries instead of Western forces to combat Islamists. Christians worldwide must recognize how religious identity is distorted to bless war and speak out for peace and truth.

# 6

## The Spread of Organized Crime

In Central and South America, drug cartels and criminal organizations continue to target brave Christian leaders who refuse to take bribes.

Drug cartel violence against Christians in Latin America has escalated as criminal groups expand operations across borders. Crackdowns in Colombia and El Salvador have sent cartels into neighboring countries like Venezuela, Peru, and Ecuador—and throughout Central America. As Christian pastors boldly speak out against the cartels' ruthless violence, they have increasingly become targets.

With organized crime metastasizing across Latin America, Christian communities suffer displacement, extortion, kidnappings, and murder—especially the church leaders willing to oppose the rising tyranny. Mexico has been hit hard, ranking fifth globally for Christian killings according to the new Violent Incidents Database. Advocacy groups are calling for regional cooperation to restore rule of law and protect religious minorities from cartel violence. Meanwhile, authoritarian regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and El Salvador exploit religion to bolster their legitimacy while restricting religious freedom for Christian leaders. Venezuela closed more churches from 2022-2023 than any other country.

# 7

## Resistance to Advocacy

Governments committing persecution are becoming increasingly hardened to advocacy for the persecuted church.

Growing allegiance with the regimes in China, Iran, and Russia is resulting in significant resistance to Christian advocacy efforts. China's "Belt & Road" infrastructure program—a strategy to invest in more than 150 countries and organizations—has directed tens of billions in loans to the governments of Vietnam, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, among others. In the Middle East, Iran wields growing influence on governments and military groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. And several Sub-Saharan African nations look to Russia for help with security against Islamist extremism.

These efforts to extend influence and increase intolerance of religious minorities have been emboldened by a perceived pullback of the West from international affairs—including the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan. Advocates for the persecuted church can expect to encounter much greater resistance to their efforts, from securing the release of imprisoned Christians to securing protections for Christian communities and places of worship. New and more effective ways to advocate for the persecuted church are urgently needed. Thankfully, efforts to strengthen advocacy for the persecuted church are already underway.

# 8

## A Rise in Christian Persecution

In 2014, the persecution of believers rose on every continent simultaneously and has continued to rise sharply ever since.

Five factors primarily contribute to this troubling trend. First, jihadist caliphates, civil wars, and resurgent authoritarians in Shia and Sunni states are ravaging the Middle East—forcing religious minorities to flee. Second, Islamic extremism gained another hub in sub-Saharan Africa, making the region the world's most violent religious fault line. Third, China's leadership has returned the country to the climate of the 1950s, during which Christians were seen as subversives likely to launch an anti-communist revolution. Fourth, Hindu extremists regained power in India in 2014 led by their charismatic leader, Narendra Modi. Fifth, Latin America has seen a huge rise in corruption and violence due to former guerilla movements morphing into narcotics traffickers and entering governments.

In response, GCR seeks to stop the exodus of Christians in the Middle East; to reduce the violence in the Sahel region by strengthening churches to bring more education and employment to the area; to resist the squeeze particularly in Asia where the church is suffocated by government surveillance and ideological pressure; and to speak up for the suffering, so the whole church may know their stories and walk with them in faith and prayer.

# 9

## Resilience of the Persecuted Church

**Under pressure, the global church continues to show astonishing strength and growth.**

A pastor in Iran once remarked, “Christians may be the victims of persecution, but the Gospel rarely is.” To exhibit his point, the church in sub-Saharan Africa is set to double in size up to 1.1 billion by 2050, according to the Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life, keeping Christianity at roughly 33% of the world population. In India, there is a remarkable movement of Hindus following Jesus: those who consider themselves culturally Hindu even though they follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

The population of former Muslims coming to Christ is rapidly growing from the Middle East to the Far East, especially in Iran and Indonesia. Even in China, a Christian social scientist remarks that, “The more the Communist Party seeks to give the people material security, the more they crave spiritual experience ... and that leads them to God, if not to church.” Perhaps the greatest concern, though, is the Middle East where Christians remain in what one pastor called Exodus mode; young, professional Christians are seeking to exit the region due to a number of factors, including persecution. Said another leader, “In the Middle East today, the Christian more and more needs a clear sense of call to remain.”

# 10

## The Advancement of Religious Freedom

**Advocacy efforts for religious freedom are becoming increasingly advanced across the West.**

Over the past decade, significant new government and civil society coalitions have formed. In 2018, the U.S. launched the first Ministerial-level government conference on international religious freedom—currently the highest formal level for a diplomatic event. The Ministerial for International Religious Freedom has continued to be hosted by successive governments, including Poland, the United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic, through 2023. In 2020, a formal alliance of countries dedicated to protecting and advancing religious freedom was launched. The International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance has since grown to 37 member states as of 2023.

International religious freedom roundtable gatherings of faith leaders and advocates have been established in nearly 25 countries. Strengthening these efforts, the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C. brings together over 1,000 speakers and attendees annually to coalesce support for persecuted communities around the world. Each of these initiatives represents an unprecedented level of coordination to advance religious freedom around the world for Christians and other people of faith.

## Prayers for China

Lord, we know the Body of Christ is alive and well in China. With 135 million Christians, this nation is home to the largest persecuted church in the world. Continue to cultivate it. May the number of those who belong to You be increased daily. Leaders in China are utilizing technology to try and limit the spread of the gospel. God, bless Your church with wisdom and discernment; let them outsmart the heavy hand of the authoritarian government. Strengthen Your children, Lord, that they will not grow weary in doing good. Embolden their faith that they will not abandon You in times of hardship.

“... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” – Acts 2:47



## Prayers for India

Heavenly Father, we grieve because Christians are marginalized in India—their voices are silenced amid the government’s increasing embrace of Hindu nationalism. Encourage Your children, God, and help them find ways to thrive despite so much opposition. In places like Chhattisgarh and Manipur, Christians have been targeted, beaten and scattered. Mob violence has shattered many lives. Protect believers throughout India, Lord. According to Psalm 46:1, be their refuge and strength amidst so much trouble. Father, we pray without ceasing for those in authority in India. May they stop turning a blind eye and come to the aid of believers across the country. May they come to know You as their Savior.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”  
– Psalm 46:1

## Prayers for Africa

God, in this part of the world we see extremist groups filled with so much hate, but we know it only takes one interaction with You to change a life forever. Work in the lives of these radicals and may they have incredible testimonies of personal transformation through Jesus Christ. When extremists arrive to cause harm, we ask You to intervene and protect Your people. May those displaced be restored to an abundant life in Your presence. Move the politicians across Africa—and other world leaders—to publicly condemn acts of religious violence, that the Body of Christ might be able to worship You freely.

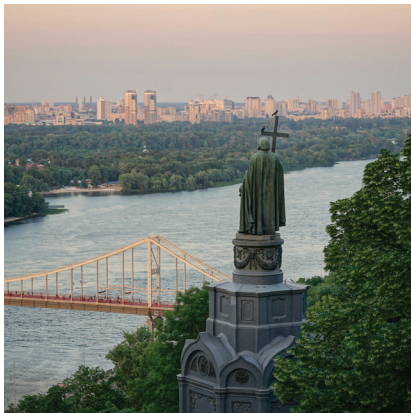
“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”  
– 2 Corinthians 5:17



## Prayers for North Korea

Lord, in East Asia millions are unaware of Your existence. The authoritarian regime demands to be worshipped; it works to restrict access to the Holy Bible. We pray for the people who are subjected to widespread disinformation. God, move in their hearts and encourage them to seek out the truth for themselves. The small minority of North Korean believers must live secret lives of faith, amid fears of intense persecution. Help these believers to live God-honoring lives and share the gospel. May their loving-kindness draw others to Christ. Sustain those who are subjected to prison, hard labor and violence. Remind them that You will never leave them or forsake them.

*“But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” – Matthew 5:44*



## Prayers for Ukraine

God, we come before You now to humbly ask for peace to be upon Ukraine. We pray that religion will no longer be weaponized and politicized to harm Your faithful followers. May Your hedge of protection be upon Ukraine’s church leaders, who have been targeted because of their faith. Father, please restore the hundreds of churches that have been damaged, looted or destroyed. In due time, we pray for You to rebuild Your church—that it would be more glorious than before. As many believers are experiencing profound distress due to displacement, violence and trauma, we pray for the comfort of the Holy Spirit to come.

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” – John 14:27*

## Prayers for Latin America

Abba, we cry out to You as organized crime groups, drug cartels and despotic regimes are opposing Your church in Central and South America. God, though many of these nations are majority-Christian, the forces of evil are growing louder and stronger. Yet they are no match for Your might and power. Continue growing your church and fostering courage in the hearts of the religious leaders in this region. May they speak out against corruption and violence—despite the threat of persecution. Do a mighty work in this part of the world and silence the enemy.

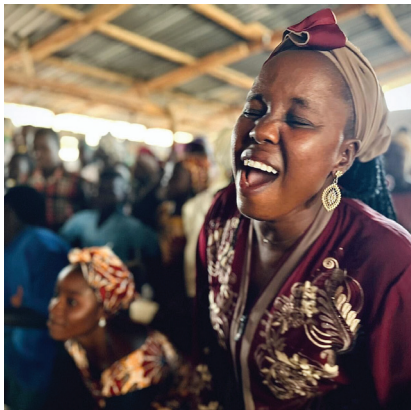
*“The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves.” – Zephaniah 3:17*



## Prayers Against the Rise of Christian Persecution

God, we pray about the sharp uptick in Christian persecution taking place all around the globe. At this time, persecution is at the highest levels in recorded history. However, the Bible says that that we can take heart because You have overcome the world. You, Lord, have the victory! So we ask You to stop the rising tide of persecution in its tracks. As our brothers & sisters are increasingly subjected to threats, harassment and violence, may their peaceful response be a profound witness to their persecutors. May those who are far from You come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

*“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”  
– Romans 12:14*



## Prayers to Strengthen the Church

Lord, though Your church is under attack, we see You strengthening it. We pray for places like sub-Saharan Africa, where the church is projected to double in size by 2050, exceeding 1 billion believers. God, we declare that no efforts of the enemy will stop the Body of Christ from growing. Hold Your followers in the palm of Your hand and make them resilient in times of trouble. Embolden them to share the gospel and pursue the Great Commission amid fierce opposition and incredible hardship. May the faithful flock remain in the challenging places until Your light shines for all to see.

*“The Lord is my strength and my defense.” – Exodus 15:2*

## Prayers for Religious Freedom

Father, we lift up the coalitions of people and governments working to advance religious freedom around the world. We pray that You would move through their peaceful dialog and diplomacy to bring forth fruitful and lasting change for our persecuted family. God, increase the number of nations and world leaders interested in championing the right to worship freely. In due time, we pray for the religious freedom movement to sweep the globe. Dry the tears of vulnerable believers who have waited in earnest for a day when they can attend church and call on Your name without fear.

*“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” – Galatians 5:1*



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