

THE VOICE OF THE MARTYRS

December 2020



2020 THE BIGGER STORY

BAPTISM IN
A BROTHEL

THE GOSPEL IS NOT
IN LOCKDOWN



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“Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.” Heb 13:3



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

2020 Was a Great Year for the Advancement of God's Kingdom

The coronavirus and its resulting hardships have increased the suffering of persecuted Christians who were already facing astonishing difficulties. But their response to this overwhelming adversity has inspired us as we have watched them move forward in God's eternal plan while shunning distraction and discouragement.

None of this year's events have changed or thwarted God's plans; everything He has purposed will surely come to pass (Isaiah 14:24). Though many have wondered, "Where is God in all of this?" and have been tempted to despair, God continues to accomplish His eternal purposes amid and even *through* this world's problems (Genesis 50:20). His ways are not our ways (see Isaiah 55:8–9), but we can see Him at work through the testimonies of His people. I pray that you are encouraged by the examples we provide in this newsletter. Christ says "lift up your eyes" (John 4:35), and, indeed, when we look beyond our challenges, we can see many victories of eternal consequence this year.

As the Apostle Paul says in 2 Cor. 2:11, we are not "outwitted by Satan" because we are not ignorant of his plans. When the enemy fails in his attempts to see us betray or deny our Lord, he tries to distract us from Christ's commands. It has broken my heart this year to see the enemy use the events of 2020 to turn good and faithful servants (see Matthew 25:23) into frustrated, fearful and fruitless servants.

We must resolve to stay focused on our Lord's instructions, and we can do so by living with

an understanding that His return is imminent. Unlike many of us in South Africa, Christians in severely persecuted lands have an advantage in embracing this truth because they have little in this world to which they are tempted to cling to. Has 2020 shaken your confidence in the things of this world? *Good!* Let us celebrate the death of our worldly desires (see 1 John 2:16).

We should awaken each day with the expectation that it may be the day of Christ's return. Jesus emphasized this sense of urgency when he explained that we must work "while it is day" because "night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4). As biblical disciples, our lives are meant to be a continual stream of choices and activities that loudly proclaim the Gospel even when we are not able to speak it aloud.

Regardless of what happens in this fallen world, two things are certain: (1) We still have a Lord, and (2) His instructions remain clear. A veteran missionary once expressed this sentiment by exclaiming, "The Great Commission still stands!" Jesus asked, "... when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8b).

Will we be found faithful?

Ashley

Thank you

We know many of you have missed the printed version of our Newsletter during 2020 but we would still encourage you to subscribe to our email version to ensure that you get the Newsletter every month by the 1st of the month.

We would like to thank our donors for continuing to support the persecuted church during this time and even though we have not been able to thank each of you personally with a Donor Letter of appreciation, please be assured we will continue to help Christians throughout the world, who are persecuted for their faith.



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Africa

Baptism in a Brothel

No one seemed surprised when rocks began hammering the tin roof of the small church in northern Ethiopia. The bride, groom and wedding party waiting in the courtyard simply moved to safer positions along the walls and continued their procession into the church.

The Believers were accustomed to rock throwing because it occurs regularly during Sunday morning worship. They live in an area where nearly everyone belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, some of whose members severely persecute evangelical Christians. These hardliners teach a works-based salvation and accuse those outside the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of heresy.

A VOM field leader who attended the wedding — one of the few evangelical weddings ever conducted in that part of Ethiopia — said the evangelical church in Ethiopia is one of the most encouraging groups of Believers with which he has had the privilege to work. “They were birthed out of persecution,” he said. “Then, to see how bold they are, and how they want to share the Gospel, and how intentional they are about going to really difficult places, is inspiring.”

Earlier this year, the field leader saw the encouraging culmination of several years of work when a displaced church moved into a new building that VOM helped it purchase; the church had lost its original building when the government built a large highway through the area. While the government reimbursed the other property owners in the path of the highway, the church received no reimbursement for its destroyed building and loss of property.

The search for a new building led the church to an unlikely location — the local brothel. The space was sufficient and, equally important, the building was in a strategic location for ministering to Somali immigrants. After the church had raised half the funds needed for



Ethiopian Christians baptized former Somali Muslims in the backyard of a church that was once a brothel.

the purchase, local hardliners discovered the pending transaction and began to pressure the property owner not to sell it to the church. But before he gave in to the pressure, VOM provided the remaining funds. “Two months later we got the pictures of the courtyard where we stood and prayed,” the field leader said. “They dug a pit, put in a tarp and baptized 18 Somalis.”

Another field worker in Africa recounted similarly encouraging results from ongoing work in Sierra Leone. Several years ago, VOM helped set up a vocational training programme that taught sewing skills and also provided mentorship and fellowship for the young Christian women involved. “When I met them, hardly any of them smiled,” the field worker said. “They were very solemn.”

The programme participants, from predominantly Muslim villages, had come to know Christ through Christians in a

neighbouring village that had once practiced child sacrifice. After many in that village were transformed by the Gospel, they in turn began sharing it with those in surrounding communities dominated by Islam. The new Believers were kicked out of their Muslim families and needed jobs to support themselves, so they requested vocational training.

At the completion of the three-year training programme, the VOM worker returned to visit the participants. The graduation ceremony for the 40 women was exuberant, as they paraded through town dancing and singing the whole way. By the time they reached the ceremony venue, the whole town was there wanting to know what was happening. The joy and transformation in the graduates' lives were plain to see. "Most of the crowd was Muslim, and the graduates were performing skits of the persecution they experienced," the VOM worker said.

Not all field work in Africa yields such visible results, however, and the joy of serving the persecuted is at times punctuated by discouragement. After travelling to the Central African Republic to deliver aid to displaced Christians, a field worker learned that Muslim invaders had destroyed missions facilities that took decades to build in one community. He was faced with daunting logistical challenges and threats from local Muslim leaders to steal relief items before they could be distributed to the Christians. "It is sometimes difficult in these contexts to help our brothers and sisters in Christ," he said.

Another co-worker later encouraged him with Psalm 10, in which the psalmist expresses dismay at why the wicked prosper while the helpless suffer. "That passage is about actually humbling yourself before your persecutors," the field worker said. "That was a big lesson. That is what Christ did. You humble yourself in front of the oppressor, which to come to that place is so hard because you are so full of anger. That has to be our response, knowing that eventually the victory is ours. We may never see that victory in our lifetime, but that is the hope that we have."

One African nation where VOM workers thought they might never see a victory is Sudan. But recent and sudden political change has provided Christian workers there a unique opportunity to advance the Gospel. Sudan's longtime Islamist dictator, President Omar al-Bashir, was ousted in a coup and replaced by a transitional government. Amid the chaos, government officials are less focused on Christian activity than they were in the past. "Christian workers have had a three-year window when nobody has been looking," VOM's regional director for Africa said. "In the next three years, anything is possible."

Bibles are entering Sudan in unprecedented numbers, and Christian workers who were forced out of the country are now returning. For example, a Sudanese Believer who fled years ago (and was subsequently expelled from Egypt for baptizing too many Muslims) has recently returned to

"The Lord is really moving among the Somali people."

his homeland. This year he spent several months in Darfur, one of Sudan's Islamist strongholds, where he shared the Gospel with three Islamic religious leaders. Although they were initially angry at him, he was able to leave an audio Bible with the men. And recently, when the worker returned, the leaders sought him out; all three had placed their faith in Christ.

Field workers are also seeing hopeful results from their many years of careful work alongside Somali ministries in East Africa. Ministry work in Somalia requires delicacy, as it is one of the most restricted countries in the world. And decades of suspicion, along with cultural habits, have resulted in a general distrust among Somalis. However, a VOM field leader reported seeing a new sense of unity among many Somali Christian leaders at a recent annual gathering. Although most of them had never met in person, many of the Somali attendees were greatly encouraged by the fellowship they experienced. "The Lord is really moving among the Somali people," the field leader said. "Of course, they share stories that are painful, where people who they thought were Believers weren't. But the Lord is doing awesome things in all these different ministries."

Throughout the African continent and in the lives of those persecuted for His sake there, the Lord is indeed doing great things (Psalm 126:3). Only He could open doors of opportunity among displaced Christians, transform a village once known for child sacrifice into a centre of regional evangelism and turn a former brothel into a church.



In Sierra Leone, a training programme in sewing gave hope to new Christian women who were kicked out of their homes.

Latin America

The Gospel Is Not in Lockdown

As coronavirus lockdowns were implemented across Colombia in April, guerrilla groups in the country's "red zones" carried out violent attacks on Christians, returning to the brutality they were known for in former years.

"As the military retreated from the town due to the lockdowns, they used that opportunity," a VOM worker said. "They are just walking house to house, pulling people out and shooting them."

Video confirming the reports shows members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) going house to house looking for anyone who would defy them. They killed an estimated 40 to 50 people in a single day.

As in the past, the Marxist guerrillas focused their attacks on Christians, particularly on former FARC members who had left the group to follow Christ. Some Believers, fearing for their lives, slept on church floors to avoid discovery.

The guerrillas also closed a number of churches during the lockdown, chaining the doors shut and spray-painting their name on the building. If anyone dares to open the churches, they will be killed.

The coronavirus provided similar opportunities for persecution against Christians in Cuba, where tensions had already been growing between Believers and Communist government authorities. In July, police destroyed a church building with sledgehammers in Santiago de Cuba, something a VOM worker said hasn't happened in years.

"We are in contact with brothers who support the pastor," a VOM worker said. "One good thing we do know: It doesn't matter that they don't have a building. The church is alive. The church is not destroyed. It's just a building."

Authorities threatened to demolish another church building, but a denominational leader told the government that if they did so, thousands of Christians and church leaders would march across Cuba in protest. Thankfully, the government reversed its decision to destroy the building.

"They ask for prayer in Cuba for all these battles that they have to wage every day with the Communist system," a VOM worker said.

Christians in southern Mexico have had their own struggles with local Marxist rebels as well as with the occult practices of some indigenous groups. But VOM workers have implemented a strategy of Bible distribution throughout the region to combat these ideologies.

A pastor in Chiapas, Mexico, has a map tacked up in his office marked with all the places Bibles have been distributed. He and other Bible distributors had feared that the map wouldn't change much during the coronavirus lockdown, but God had other plans.

The boxes of Bibles were stored away in April with the expectation that they wouldn't reach Believers until the lockdowns were lifted. However, by mid-June, most of the 16,000 Bibles had been distributed to those whose names were on the waiting list.

"I still don't know how the pastors got permission to get out, but they did," a VOM worker said. "It seems like they found a window."

As pastors in southern Mexico were finding ways to distribute Bibles despite the lockdown, Christians in Colombia were in need of assistance as the violence from guerrilla groups continued. The FARC prevented one pastor from buying groceries for his family for several months, threatening to kill him if he tried to provide food for his wife, children and himself. They targeted the pastor simply because he shared the Gospel.

"We got this guy out of that situation and we were able to help him," a VOM worker said. ***"The enemy is never angry at pastors who sit still."***

Despite the FARC's increased violence against Christians, Colombians are coming to faith in Christ. Children are reading their new copies of *The Action Bible*, which the guerrilla groups try to confiscate as religious propaganda, and their parents are falling in love with God's Word.

In addition, joy is filling the faces of children who are receiving VOM's Christmas Care Packs. The Christmas Care Packs, which include school supplies, hygiene items, a toy and a Bible, help assure children that their Christian family members love them. The FARC often promise them new clothes and shoes as enticements to join them, but when the children understand that their brothers and sisters in Christ care for them, they are less likely to join the rebels.

Such a gift changed the course of one boy's life. Carlos received a VOM Christmas Care Pack about six years ago, when he was 14. He had recently lost his father, who was killed for preaching the Gospel, and receiving a Christmas Care Pack during that time of intense pain helped assure him that he was loved by his Christian brothers and sisters. Today, Carlos is a missionary. He still remembers the joy of receiving the Christmas Care Pack, and he told a VOM worker that it changed his outlook on life.

"The Christmas Care Packs are a manifestation of God's love in their life," the VOM worker said. "This is probably, for these kids specifically, the most valuable gift they have ever received in their lives, and it is coming from the church."

Despite the violence and shutting down of church buildings, Front-line Workers continue their kingdom work. While guerrilla groups go door to door killing Christians, Believers go house to house ministering to members of their church. Christians remain careful yet bold in their outreach, knowing the Gospel is never on lockdown.

December 2020/January 2021

Prayer Diary

DECEMBER 2020

S 20	CUBA	Pray for Christian brothers and sisters who are beaten and threatened by the government.	<input type="checkbox"/>
M 21	LAOS	Pray that local officials will understand that Christianity is not an American religion.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 22	ALGERIA	Pray for opportunities to distribute Bibles in every city in Algeria, especially in the south.	<input type="checkbox"/>
W 23	UGANDA	Pray that ministers will boldly continue their evangelistic efforts in areas where they are threatened.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 24	ISRAEL	Pray for Believers in the Gaza Strip, some of whom face extreme persecution.	<input type="checkbox"/>
F 25	IRAN	Pray for the comfort and courage of those imprisoned because of their faith in Christ.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 26	KYRGYZSTAN	Pray for President Sooronbay Jeenbekov.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 27	NORTH KOREA	Pray that underground Christians will maintain a faithful witness in their villages.	<input type="checkbox"/>
M 28	COLOMBIA	Pray for pastors, widows and orphans in Colombia's "red zones."	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 29	MYANMAR	Pray that young Believers will be inspired to reach remote and dangerous regions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
W 30	SRI LANKA	Pray for Sri Lankan missionaries in other parts of the world.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 31	SOMALIA	Pray for Somali Believers who risk their lives to share the Gospel.	<input type="checkbox"/>

I prayed

JANUARY 2021

F 1	TURKMENISTAN	Pray for President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 2	CUBA	Pray for Christian leaders being threatened with imprisonment by their oppressive government	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 3	Sudan	Pray for evangelists as they travel throughout the country preaching the Gospel and strengthening Believers.	<input type="checkbox"/>
M 4	PAKISTAN	Pray for evangelists who face harassment when preaching the Gospel.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 5	AZERBAIJAN	Pray for President Ilham Aliyev and the government.	<input type="checkbox"/>
W 6	BAHRAIN	Pray for Ahmed, who lost his family and faces discrimination at work because of his faith.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 7	KYRGYZSTAN	Pray that Believers will find ways to witness in any circumstance.	<input type="checkbox"/>
F 8	DJIBOUTI	Pray for unity among Christian groups working in Djibouti.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 9	SYRIA	Pray for the few Christians in the Kurdish Qamishli area of Syria.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 10	BRUNEI	Pray that seekers and new Believers will be protected from persecutors among the country's leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>
M 11	MOROCCO	Pray for the wisdom of Believers caught by secret police.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 12	EGYPT	Pray for Hanna who was ostracized and imprisoned because of her decision to follow Christ.	<input type="checkbox"/>
W 13	TAJIKISTAN	Pray for creative Scripture distribution efforts.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 14	KUWAIT	Pray that young Kuwaitis seeking God will come to know Jesus Christ.	<input type="checkbox"/>
F 15	CAMEROON	Pray for pastors targeted by Boko Haram as they shepherd their congregations.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 16	IRAN	Pray for house-church leaders who have lost a spouse this year.	<input type="checkbox"/>

I prayed

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NEW

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