

CHRISTIANS AND GENOCIDE: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

AN ECUMENICAL STUDY DAY ON THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

TRURO METHODIST CHURCH, 14TH MAY, 2016

After an opening hymn and prayer **Dr Russell Blacker** introduced this second study day about the worldwide persecuted church by listing what we ordinary people can actually do to help the situation:

- 1) **Pray regularly and with faith**, perhaps by signing up with the various NGOs' prayer diaries. Group prayer. Pray with focus and so...
- 2) **Find out what is happening**, e.g. by reading the National Caucus email Newsletter.
- 3) **Pass the information on**, raise awareness through church, Diocese, tweeting, Facebook, etc.
- 4) **Practise** seeing what it might feel like to be the persecuted church, e.g. by worshipping in a secret place at night, when it is raided.
- 5) **Donate** generously, e.g. via the NGOs.
- 6) **Lobby**, armed with the facts – write and speak to MPs, Ministers of State, media (e.g. phone-in programmes, Donna Birrell on BBC Radio Cornwall).
- 7) **Volunteer**, become physically involved with the NGOs.
- 8) **Study and understand**: this persecution has a profound eschatological significance.
- 9) **Learn from those who suffer**: *"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"* (Tertullian). Pray that God will use *their* witness and the mass migration to bring many peoples to a knowledge of His saving grace.

The first speaker was **Baroness Caroline Cox**, founder of the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust www.hart-uk.org, who has travelled widely, often at great personal risk, and who sees herself as a voice for the voiceless in the House of Lords. Quoting *1 Corinthians 12:26* she reminded us that when one part of the Body of Christ suffers we all suffer and the priority asked of us by persecuted Christians is **prayer**. HART aims to support those largely neglected by the large international aid organizations, which can only operate with the approval of a country's government.

She spoke of the persecution suffered by Christians in **Sudan, South Sudan and Nigeria**, particularly since the 1989-2005 war in South Sudan, which had resulted in 2 million deaths and 4 million displaced. She described horrendous conditions, where Islamic aid is conditional and many thousands are captured, tortured, or sold into slavery, but where the big aid organizations can't go in for fear of upsetting the government. HART has rescued families and children from slavery, but there are still tens of thousands, particularly Sudanese from south Sudan and the Nuba mountains, enslaved today. Bishop Moses saves lives and helps with emergency aid, but there is great need for food aid. He preaches a gospel of love and reconciliation, and recently confirmed over 3,000 Christians from 3 villages into the Anglican Church and there have been many baptisms, with the Church growing under persecution. There has been more bombing of civilian targets, such as schools and hospitals. Education is seen as very important, using the Kenya Curriculum in Christian schools, because the Khartoum curriculum is Islamic. ("Exam pressure with a difference" meant hiding in caves when raided, after placing a stone on the papers, so that the students could return to them after the planes have gone.) There is hidden genocide, such as in Blue Nile State, where a Christian village celebrated Christmas while dying of starvation and bombing, but a Muslim head man showed love for his Christian brothers and sisters in defiance of the government. There is true Christian love and hope alongside despair.

In **Nigeria** thousands of Christians have been killed, because Boko Haram aims to eradicate Christians from Northern Nigeria. "The Very stones cry out" (the title of a 2011 book by Caroline Cox and Benedict Rogers), but they cry out with "Worship!", because there is a living faith in the midst of persecution and the destruction of churches, which lives, grows and loves. Interfaith initiatives show Christian love in action, with good things happening in the darkness. As Archbishop Ben Kwashi of Jos, Nigeria said: "If we have a faith worth living for, it is a faith worth dying for. Don't YOU compromise the faith that WE are living and dying for". We in this country are compromising the faith when we

are going back before Magna Carta by allowing the development of Sharia law. The motto of HART is “I cannot do everything, but I cannot do nothing”: we can always PRAY then God will show us what He wants us to do.

Before the coffee break **Russell Blacker** introduced a very telling – and harrowing – talk and video on the subject of “**Addressing indifference**”. Persecution is growing and is global, but the main problem is dealing with apathy and indifference in our society, where governments walk by on the other side because there is no economic or political significance and the general public, and even Christian congregations, are indifferent. Thus, hundreds of thousands of persecuted Christians worldwide are dependent on the generosity of the few.

The video showed an elderly man in Germany still haunted by a dream of his childhood memory of a service in a Christian church right beside the railway line transporting Jews to the concentration camps. When the train broke down the cries of prisoners could be heard, but the minister continued preaching on Christian love and charity and told the choir and congregation to “sing louder”. The boy had run out and seen a woman prisoner who called to him and asked him his name, but he didn’t reply; then a guard started to threaten him and his mother dragged him back into the church. No film could have better illustrated the parable of the Good Samaritan, when the representatives of the “established church” looked by on the other side. *Proverbs 24: 11* reminds us to “Rescue those being led away to death”.

After the break **Nissar Hussain**, a British Pakistani Christian convert, spoke of his experience of harassment and persecution in Bradford as a result of his conversion from Islam to Christianity. Despite being attacked outside his home, his car burnt and threats to his family the police turn a blind eye to such “race relations” incidents, because they are terrified of being labelled Islamophobic. He affirmed that this lawlessness and mob rule is not the England he was born and raised in, but despite suffering such terrorism they are not supported by fellow Christians, because fear is crippling the Body of Christ: the church needs to wake up. He has nevertheless learned to trust in Jesus.

Wilson Chowdhry, Chair of the British Pakistani Christian Association (BPCA), an organization aiming to highlight the abuse of Christians in Pakistan, in particular under “Sharia law”, also fighting slavery, and providing humanitarian aid, outlined the situation in **Pakistan**, now risen from 13th to 6th of countries with the worst persecution record according to Open Doors’ World Watch statistics, and the UN’s 3rd worst country for human rights and 6th for poverty. There are 10 million Christians, whose church attendance record is better than that in the UK. The apostle Thomas is reputed to have brought Christianity to Pakistan, so it is not a western faith introduced in recent centuries. Islam came later and persecution began from the 7th century onwards. He described many harrowing cases of violence and victimisation of Christians, where the rule of law has failed, because many Christian lawyers have been too afraid to intervene. Modern day slavery is rife, with an estimated 95% of bonded labourers being Christians and the Christian community misses out on free medical care. They also suffer under the education system, where the Islamic national curriculum breeds hatred and Islamic studies are compulsory at university for the professions. But thousands still pack the churches, which are protected by volunteer security officers. Christians are also targeted in employment, where only non-Muslims work in the “dirty” jobs, such as in the brick-making kilns, but Christians are willing to be persecuted, because we are called to stand up for the truth: *1 Peter 2: 20-24*. It is our duty to help (*Matthew 25: 39-41*) because “in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (*Romans 12: 5*). He concluded: “Our God is great”, and the cross which has been built in Karachi is the biggest cross in Asia.

Two brief additions to the programme came from first **Derek Thomas, MP** for St. Ives, who appealed for us to pray for Christian MPs, that they are not too busy to address the issues raised today. We should also get the church engaged and speak and speak until we can’t be ignored.

Then Syrian Christian **Dr Salem Murjaneh** spoke briefly about the situation in **Syria** and **Lebanon** and in particular in Aleppo, where he and his family came from. No aid from the British government goes to Aleppo, only from the smaller NGOs, in particular the Barnabas Fund, and there are no Christians in the refugee camps. He described the background to the war in Syria, where freedom of religion was granted under civil law in 1830, with Christians given equality with Muslims, but increasing tension from 1860 onwards led to the Armenian Genocide, which peaked in

1915 and is now being renewed. Their Social Service Committee helps Muslim families as well as Christians and he asked us to pray for the survival of their communities and for the army to protect them.

The afternoon sessions followed another hymn and a paraphrased reading from *Revelation 3: 15-17* referring to the church in England as the Church in Laodicea - "lukewarm, neither hot nor cold". First **Yochana Darling** and **Howard Stern** from the International Christian Consulate (ICC), an NGO established in 2015, spoke of the Christian refugees in **Greece** and elsewhere across **Europe**. With reference to the parable in *Matthew 25: 31-39* they said the silence of the church has been deafening for too long. Christian refugees to Europe meet the same persecution in Europe which they have fled their countries to escape from, but the lack of hard data highlights the western lack of understanding of middle-eastern cultures. Christians are targeted in government run camps and Greece's problems, with a bankrupt country and much reliance on foodbanks, have been exacerbated by the arrival of the refugees, with boats still arriving from Turkey to the Greek islands. The refugees are already traumatised just from the crossing and the smugglers are mostly Afghans, who have amassed vast sums in profit from the crisis. Greece was a transit camp, but is now blocked, which is a particular problem for the Christian minorities who are attacked in the camps where there is a mix of nationalities, religions and cultures, with huge food queues, often leaving nothing for the Christians, who fear for their lives and their children's safety, especially their daughters who can be demanded from the smugglers as payment. There is inequality because the refugees, with their different cultures, do not see themselves as equal, so the Christian minorities go into hiding. Contrary to media reporting over 50% of refugees are Afghans and many of the "children" are extremist teenage Afghan boys.

There is a lack of aid coordination and a lack of understanding of the situation in the camps, where Christians and other minorities are very vulnerable and in urgent need of alternative shelter. Surveys reported 87% of interviewees witnessing threats specifically to Christians in camps, not just in Greece but also in Germany, France and Sweden. There have been appeals for refugees of different faiths to be housed in different camps, because asylum seekers' conflicts from their home country come with them and this is a pan-European problem. A report of the Greek Orthodox Church said there is a desperate need for the separation of Christians from the dangers in the camps and the ICC is working to build such a camp if it has the funds. We were shown a video of the camps, where Christians are most at risk, and the passivity in the church was compared with *Isaiah 59: 15-16*: "The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene." We need to lobby our MPs and were warned that similar trouble would be coming to London.

The next speaker was **Julia Bicknell**, a former BBC world reporter from 1980-2012, who founded World Watch Monitor in 2012. She explained that the reason for Muslim persecution of converts to Christianity, which is most often by the believer's own family, is that apostasy is seen as a betrayal of the family and everything the local community stands for and their society holds dear, which is often not understood in the west. She then spoke about Christian persecution in **Cuba**, which is still Communist, with freedom of worship and belief still forbidden despite the recent opening up, and in Central and South America, especially **Mexico**, which is no. 40 on the World Watch list and **Colombia**, no. 46. Mexico is one of the most violent regions in the world, where Christians threaten powerful vested interests and are therefore often targeted in attacks, but where social pressures, secular religious intolerance, tribal antagonism and denominational protectionism also threaten them. Similarly in Colombia, where there is also a backdrop of violence with large areas controlled by criminal organizations, Christians are specifically vulnerable to hostilities and tribal antagonism. The legacy of armed conflict results in rebel guerrillas infiltrating churches and recruiting the young to join them. She also mentioned **Argentina**, where there had been an assassination attempt on a Baptist pastor and corrupt local officials had been misusing the law against him, so that the law was a threat to religious freedom. Latin American Christians need protection from organized crime and corruption. She summarised by saying that 85% of the world suffers religious persecution and the western world does not understand that in most of the world faith is integral to life. She also mentioned the dangers of the present militant Hinduism in India.

Finally **Chris Miles**, from SAT-7, spoke about its work in education, health and other broadcasting across the **Middle East** and **North Africa** (MENA). Their programmes are culturally sensitive, without western values, using presenters

from the region, such as Iranians living in London for the broadcasts to Iran, which are free to watch and obtain, using satellites. SAT-7's core purpose and ministry is to make the Gospel freely available and to grow the church, making God's love visible in the MENA region, which covers three main different language groups. The demographic population age chart for the region shows 60% under 21 and 40% of the Arab world under 14 and there is widespread ownership of satellite dishes. SAT-7 has been broadcasting for 20 years and has been a catalyst for renewal in the region. It broadcasts 24/7 TV, in 5 languages and across several time zones, with a wide variety of programmes for all, including women, children, and young people, showing films, Bible teaching, church services and educational services to the lost generation of children because of the turmoil in the region. Referring to *Proverbs 1: 1-4* and *22: 6* he quoted "With guns you can kill terrorists; with education you can kill terrorism", because children watch TV. There are 17 million refugees from MENA; 1 in 2 Syrians have fled their homes and 51% of the world's refugees are children; 13 million children in the Middle East can't go to school because of war, with schools destroyed, with the result that children are a prey for the radicals. Many refugees watch satellite TV in the camps, where SAT-7 offers comfort and hope. They launched "My School" educational programmes for 5-7 year olds in February 2015 and have plans to expand, broadcasting Monday – Friday during school hours on the children's channel: children watch with their mothers and the parents are thrilled. In Syria 2.8 million children are out of school and thus at greater risk of violent attack, rape and recruitment for military training and indoctrination. They also provide a weekly health programme to help refugees. We were shown videos of a church in Egypt, a refugee camp in Kurdistan and Persian Farsi language programmes for Iran and Afghanistan. How we can help SAT-7 is by becoming informed, praying for the viewers and the programme makers, telling others about SAT-7, supporting them financially or joining the volunteer programme: further details on www.sat7uk.org . SAT-7 is changing lives in the region.

This informative though harrowing day finished with worship, including a hymn, prayer and the "Afghan Communion", using a grape each for the bread and wine, as practised in areas where Christians have to worship in secret and are always in danger of raids.

Sue Mills

Websites of related organizations

www.hart-uk.org

www.britishpakistanichristians.org

www.internationalchristianconsulate.com

www.worldwatchmonitor.org

www.sat7uk.org

www.opendoorsuk.org/

<https://barnabasfund.org/>