

STANDING UP FOR FREEDOM BECAUSE CHRIST HAS SET US FREE

Danny Webster

THE UK GOVERNMENT HAS BACKED A REVIEW THAT CALLS FOR INCREASED SUPPORT FOR CHRISTIANS SUFFERING FOR THEIR FAITH ACROSS THE WORLD. DANNY WEBSTER EXPLORES HOW THE GOVERNMENT CAN HELP AND HOW CHRISTIANS CAN STAND WITH THE PERSECUTED CHURCH.

An independent review of UK support for persecuted Christians has called for substantial changes in how Christians overseas are supported by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

The Bishop of Truro's independent report to the Foreign Secretary highlighted that the persecution of Christians should be considered as a global phenomenon, but one with a wide variety of triggers and drivers. Because of the gradual emergence of the problem and the range of causes, the review found that it has also "been significantly overlooked in the West". The report also reflected on the impact of the long term legacy of British colonial activity which meant British officials and ministers may be reluctant to criticise repressive practices overseas.

The review took evidence from within government, hearing from those in the UK and in embassies and high commissions around the world. It also spoke to key non-

governmental organisations including Open Doors UK, Release International and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). The final report from the review has been accepted in full by the government and since the change in leadership at the FCO Christian groups have pressed Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab to maintain the focus on this issue established by his predecessor, Jeremy Hunt.

In a key finding the report said: "Given the scale of persecution of Christians today, indications that it is getting worse and that its impact involves the decimation of some of the faith group's oldest and enduring communities, the need for governments to give increasing priority and specific targeted support to this faith community is not only necessary but increasingly urgent."

Dr Dave Landrum, director of advocacy at the Evangelical Alliance, welcomed the release of the report: "The challenge is immense, but the Foreign Office is an extensive and well-respected diplomatic network that can make a real difference in tackling these human rights abuses. It should make this issue a priority, not least because the freedoms to hold, express and change religious beliefs are the bedrock for all our other human rights and civil liberties. If religious freedoms diminish so will everything else."

Attention on the plight of religious minorities, and particularly Christians has increased in recent years, and the persistent campaigning of Christians in

the UK and beyond has helped achieve this. The United Nations has declared 22 August as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, held in 2019 for the first time. Prime Minister Boris Johnson marked this inaugural day by noting:

"Freedom of religion or belief is at the heart of what the UK stands for. We will do everything possible to champion these freedoms and protect civilians in armed conflict including religions, ethnic or other minorities."

He went on to refer to the Bishop of Truro's review and said: "We have accepted, and will implement, all of the Review's challenging recommendations. We will use the UK's global reach and programme funding to improve the lives of persecuted people."

The UK government has also established the John Bunyan Fund, which will allocate funding in its first year to gain a deeper understanding of the problem and what current support is provided as well as determine how best the government can take practical steps to bring about positive change.

As Christians it is important that we welcome and encourage government action to support our fellow believers around the world, especially those who risk and often lose their lives to worship freely. We should continue to press the government to stand up for religious

freedom for all and recognise where Christians in particular are suffering because of their beliefs.

The Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission brings together member organisations that work in this area. CSW, Open Doors UK and Release International all have significant experience at working with persecuted Christians around the world and speaking up on their behalf, raising awareness with government and the media, as well as helping the Church in the UK to stand alongside those who suffer for their faith.

For example, each year Open Doors UK produce their World Watch List which lists the 50 countries where Christians experience the worst persecution. This measures the freedom Christians have to live out their faith in private, family, community, national and church life as well as the level of violence experienced. As a rigorous measure of what goes on across the world this resource has rightly received significant coverage, including an annual event in parliament to showcase the latest results and to inform parliamentarians about the situation facing Christians.

The 2019 list shows that North Korea remains the place where Christians suffer the worst persecution, a position it has held for the past 18 years. However, it is not alone, five years ago it was the only country to be ranked in the 'extreme' category, now it is joined by ten other countries, showing that worldwide persecution of Christians is getting worse.

In February 2019 David Linden MP asked 50 written questions to the Foreign Secretary asking what the government was doing to tackle persecution in each of the countries featuring on this year's list. In response he received a single response highlighting the Bishop of Truro's then ongoing review.

The persecution of Christians overseas has rightly received increased political attention, however, government action should not be an alternative to our action to stand side by side with those who suffer for their faith. As the Church across the world we should provide support where we can, and prayer in all cases to aid our brothers and sisters in Christ.

KNOW WHAT IS HAPPENING

The first thing that we should do is to know what is happening around the world. Sometimes it can be overwhelming to feel as though we have to know everything that is happening about every situation Christians are encouraged to care about. It can seem as though there is an ever growing list of issues that Christians should passionately support and I recognise that this can be draining. It can even lead to a sense of fatigue, but I would encourage you to take time to learn about the experience of Christians in places where they fear for their lives every time they go to worship, or risk arrest when they talk about their faith to their neighbours.

Perhaps a starting point is to pick a country or a region that you can learn more about, or maybe a global trend that is coursing problems for Christians. For example, the rise of militant Islam has increased pressure on Christians not only in the Middle East but also in North Africa and beyond. State restrictions on Christian activity is another common theme that is worth investigating to see the countries where there are laws against conversion, or criticism of other beliefs. Open Doors' World

Watch List is a good place to start. www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution

CSW have an extensive library of news updates and resources relating to the countries they work in at www.csw.org.uk. Along with other organisations serving the persecuted church they have resources you can sign up to receive via email or post.

PRAY FOR OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS

The enormity of the challenge facing Christians in some of the harshest regimes in the world should encourage us to reach out in prayer rather than despair. We may not be able to change laws restricting Christians in Uzbekistan, but we believe in a God who can. We believe that God works miracles in some of the most difficult circumstances and brings comfort and strength to those who endure suffering for their faith.

Release International is another organisation that helps Christians guide their prayers for the persecuted church, they provide daily email prayer alerts and other resources on their website www.releaseinternational.org/pray. I regularly receive Open Door's prayer diary through the post and it provides sobering reading but also stories of hope amid the darkness.

Brother Andrew, the founder of Open Doors and author of God's Smuggler, said about prayer: "If we want to leave an indelible mark on the world, there is no more powerful way to do it than by joining in God's purposes through prayer. Our prayers can go where we cannot. While many things may seem impossible from a human standpoint, in the realm of prayer there are no impossibilities."

PROVIDE SUPPORT

Just because we cannot do everything doesn't mean we can't do something. While situations may seem huge, and challenges immense, we can make a difference in our world today. We can write to our MPs to call on them to raise the persecution of Christians with the government and speak up for religious freedom in international negotiations. We can write to Christians overseas, CSW provide a service to link Christians with brothers and sisters in places where it is both safe for them to receive letters from Christians, but who are under pressure because of their beliefs.

We can join campaigns, protests and petitions and encourage others in our churches to join with us. All the organisations I've mentioned have resources for churches to learn more about the challenges and have speakers available to visit your congregation.

These organisations have many years of experience working with the persecuted church and have learnt what actions are helpful and what could contribute to further suffering. It is important that we respect their wisdom and guidance. While established organisations do not have a monopoly on providing support to Christians across the world our first response should be to know what is already being done and where we can legitimately assist rather than jumping in headfirst. I've heard incredible stories of people involved with Bible smuggling and working with underground churches, but I also know that the people involved have learnt many lessons very quickly, including some that others have learnt before and could have helped them avoid.

STAND UP FOR FREEDOM

Above all we should stand up for freedom. Freedom is often called for, and it is often repressed. As Christians we know that true freedom comes in Christ, but that in this world today we can help others live in freedom and experience some of the true freedom that God brings.

We cannot force people to follow Jesus, the Christian faith just doesn't work like that. But we can work for a world where people have the freedom to hear the gospel and the freedom to accept or reject it. That means we speak up for freedom when it is restricted, whether at home or abroad, it means we respect the reality that we live in a society of competing beliefs, but have confidence in the goodness of God and the power of His message.

We stand for freedom as we encourage Christians suffering for their faith, and we are encouraged by their faithfulness and the freedom they have in Christ in the midst of the harshest challenges.

Danny Webster has worked for the Evangelical Alliance since 2008 in a variety of roles in the advocacy team. He currently looks after media relations and oversees advocacy programmes and projects. Previously Danny worked in parliament and has degrees in politics and political philosophy. He is passionate about encouraging Christians to integrate their faith with all areas of their life, especially when it comes to leading in public life.

