

Once-Tortured Christian Is Now an Advocate for the Persecuted Church

After barely escaping death, Wally Magdangal launched Christians in Crisis to help other believers around the world

A Filipino pastor and evangelist who was scheduled for public hanging in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Christmas Day 1992 now leads an organization that supports persecuted Christians worldwide.

Wally Magdangal had just two days left to live when he was spared execution due to the intervention of international human-rights groups, the U.S. Congress and the White House. His crime, according to the Saudi Arabian muttawa'in, or Islamic religious police, was blasphemy. It was a trumped-up charge, he says, based on his agreement with a Christian magazine article that predicted the ultimate fall of Islam.

He says the real reason he was imprisoned was because the underground church he'd led for 10 years in a sprawling Riyadh villa had become one of the largest in Saudi Arabia, with between 300 and 700 people attending each service. Magdangal and his wife, Mathilda, leased the villa, which included a pool they used for baptisms, from a wealthy Muslim who knew of their activities and cautioned them to be careful.

"All the Muslim taxi drivers knew where our church was, so they'd drop people off who wanted to come but didn't know the address," said Magdangal, who worked as executive secretary to the Saudi director of defense and civil aviation. "We avoided punishment because government officials who were sent to spy

on us would get saved and tell us who they were. Also, some of the people I worked with were very high up in the government and wouldn't allow anyone to hurt me."

Magdangal and his wife moved several times to avoid arrest, and a few months before he was imprisoned Magdangal had to escape through a back window when his house was overtaken by soldiers.

The Saudi Arabian government prohibits the public practice of any religion other than Islam, and the government and much of society don't accept any separation of church and state, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Proselytizing by non-Muslims, including Bible distribution, is illegal. All Saudi citizens must be Muslim, the commission's 2000 report said.

Magdangal was imprisoned for two and a half months; for much of the time he said he was chained in a 3-foot-by-4-foot cell filled with feces. He said he was routinely interrogated, forced to listen to Quranic incantations, beaten and frequently deprived of food and water. One day he was taken into a torture chamber where three muttawa'in flogged him on his back, his palms and the soles of his feet until his skin turned purple.

"That agony lasted for 210 minutes; I know because there was a clock in the chamber," he said. "My torturers were amazed I kept getting up off the floor. I was amazed too, but I felt angels picking me up."

Eventually he was dragged off to his cell to die. "I prayed and then fell unconscious," he recalled. "I don't know if I

died, but I heard angelic voices and instruments playing. Suddenly, a bright light was all around me and I knew it was the glory of God. I could feel hands touching my face; I looked up and it was Jesus. He wiped away my tears and told me He saw everything I went through. When I woke up the next morning I felt fine and started worshipping God.”

Magdangal was then transferred to a different part of the prison, where he witnessed to the other inmates. During this time, he appeared before the High Court of Saudi Arabia and was sentenced to death by hanging for committing blasphemy. Public hangings for blasphemers are routinely carried out on Fridays in Saudi Arabia, while public beheadings are common for apostates—those who renounce Islam—and murderers, human-rights organizations say.

After Mathilda and their 2-year-old daughter, Preshus Joy, visited an unrecognizable Magdangal in prison a few weeks before his scheduled execution, his alarmed wife wrote a letter to the president of the Philippines, Fidel Ramos. He circulated Magdangal’s story to international media outlets, and Amnesty International issued an urgent action bulletin on Dec. 22—three days before Magdangal was to be executed.

On Dec. 23, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia issued a royal decree for Magdangal to be released and expelled from the country within 24 hours. On Christmas Day, just one hour before his scheduled execution, Magdangal landed in his homeland, the Philippines. He stayed for several months, then he and his family toured Europe, visiting heads of state to tell them about the persecution and torture of Christians and other groups in Saudi Arabia.

Magdangal and his family moved to the U.S. in 1993 and now

live in Sacramento. Christians in Crisis () supports persecuted believers through a network of 500,000 intercessors, and through donations pays for projects such as purchasing bicycles for Chinese evangelists, building seminaries in China and assisting Christians after natural disasters.

Josie Newman