

# The Faith Keeps Spreading

Can the persecution of Christians lead to an even faster spread of Christianity than if believers aren't afflicted for their faith? The evidence from the experience of the early church, Christian history and our own day is pretty clear: Yes.

The earliest Christian martyr on record is Stephen, murdered by the mob a very short time after the day of Pentecost itself. His death by stoning touched off a great counterattack against Christianity.

"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered...[and] preached the Word wherever they went" (Acts 8:1, 4; NIV).

That early transmission of the Word of God became the pattern of Christian growth in the first few centuries A.D. along the trade and transportation routes of the entire Mediterranean area and Roman Empire. Persecution was not a permanent or universal feature of the early church, but it happened often enough to cause Christians to migrate frequently and establish new communities.

Northern Europe was not Christianized until less than a thousand years ago, after centuries of missionary effort. But the next rapid spread of Christianity occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries as a result of the Reformation. The governments and established churches of nominally Christian countries fiercely persecuted the fervent new communities of believers. Christians migrated once more to areas where they could worship freely.

I saw two striking examples of this phenomenon in our own day while attending a conference in May in Barcelona, Spain. A Christian journalist from Khartoum, Sudan, who originally was from southern Sudan, explained how the war by the Khartoum regime against the Christian and animist south had led to the influx into the Khartoum region of some 2 million refugees.

To the dismay of the Islamic government of Khartoum, he said, there are now so many southern Sudanese Christians in the capital that Christians have been able to organize Christmas and Easter parades, undertake Bible translation work and distribute Christian literature.

Less than a mile from the conference was another example of a failed effort to persecute Christians. As two Chinese Christians from Beijing performed a brilliant classical guitar duet outside Barcelona's Gothic cathedral, a third Chinese, a woman from Wenzhou in China's Zhejiang province sold the duo's CDs to the audience.

The wonderful irony of this is that in the 1960s Mao Zedong's communists had tried to make Wenzhou a completely religion-free city. Any public display of worship was illegal.

The result was that Wenzhou's Christians learned how to spread the gospel and conduct their worship in small cell-groups hidden in private homes or away on remote hillsides. With the collapse of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, Wenzhou emerged as the most highly Christianized city in China. Almost 30 percent of its people were fervent Christians.

But Wenzhou's citizens also turned out to be highly successful retail entrepreneurs. They established business communities, and Christian communities, all over China, Russia and Europe.

In Barcelona, the largest of three Chinese churches is composed of Wenzhou Christians. In Paris it is not uncommon for a thousand Chinese Christians to come together for worship, most of them from Wenzhou.

Wenzhou and the countryside around it in China have some huge churches, some of them five-stories high and all paid for by contributions from newly wealthy merchants. Not surprisingly, the very visibility of Christianity in the city that once set out to eliminate its presence has annoyed the central government, which late last year ordered the destruction of dozens of unregistered church structures.

No sane person would wish persecution on any Christian community anywhere. But as the example of Wenzhou illustrates, what the enemy intends to suppress Christianity is often just as likely to cause it to spread more.