

Christian Churches Officially Extinct in Afghanistan

The U.S. State Department report on religious freedom indicates that there is no Christian church open to the public in Afghanistan. There are also no Christian schools.

Afghanistan has seen a decrease in religious liberty in the past decade, especially since American troops have been active there. Although the last known Christian church was demolished last year, Todd Nettleton with Voice of the Martyrs says, "I think there is an element of openness that maybe wasn't there, particularly during the time when the Taliban was in control, when it was a very hard place to work, a very hard place to get into."

The report findings are no surprise. Afghanistan ranks third on the Open Doors World Watch List, a compilation of the countries where persecution of Christians is the worst.

Again, citing negative social opinions and suspicion of Christian and Western activity as the causes behind the "targeting of Christian groups and individuals, including Muslim converts to Christianity," the report notes that "the lack of government responsiveness and protection for these groups and individuals contributed to the deterioration of religious freedom."

Nettleton also says, however, that won't change their approach to ministry at all. "Consider whether the church is a building, or the church is God's people," he says. "It is possible that the last church *building* in Afghanistan has been destroyed, but we know from our contacts that the church as God's people in Afghanistan is still very much alive and well."

Afghanistan's constitution declares, "The religion of the

state of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the sacred religion of Islam.” Followers of other religions may exercise their faith and perform religious rites “within the limits of the provisions of law.” However, the catch is “no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam,” which the constitution also says.

Due to the strength of the opposition, Nettleton says believers aren’t recklessly following Christ: “There is a risk, and we have seen reports earlier this year of a Christian being killed; we have seen Christians who had been imprisoned by the Afghan government because they had left Islam to follow another faith.”

Rather, they focus on the relationship they have with the person of Christ. Coupled with the instability, Nettleton says there is openness to the hope of the gospel. “There is a time when people do ask questions of eternity; they do ask questions of faith and what it means,” he says. “I think, also, you have had more access to the country by foreign Christians to be able to develop friendships and tell people about what they believe and why they’re there.”

The most important thing now, Nettleton says, is to “pray for Afghan Christians to be able to have great wisdom, but also to have boldness in sharing about Jesus Christ with their family members, with their friends, with their neighbors.”