

They Are Not Alone

Open Doors USA already serves Christians facing impossible odds and brutal persecution within their own countries. In the COVID-19 era, that job just became even harder, according to Open Doors CEO David Curry.

“Open Doors serves Christians who are persecuted for their faith in places like the Middle East or Asia where, either culturally or because of governmental religious restrictions, people aren’t allowed to legally or practically practice their Christian faith,” Curry says. “So what we do is we supply them with the things they need to have church or to train pastors. And many times, in these cases, we also have to help provide food, water, medical care—anything they need to help survive in a crisis.”

The organization also catalogs the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian through its World Watch List. Countries are ranked based on levels of persecution and anti-Christian incidents. The 2020 list was topped by North Korea, with Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya and Pakistan rounding out the top five.

But Curry says the work of Open Doors has been greatly affected by coronavirus outbreaks around the world, complicating efforts to supply Christians with needed resources and even triggering further hostility against Christian communities in some regions.

“[The pandemic] complicates how we can connect with the persecuted church,” Curry says. “We are what we call a ‘people-to-people organization.’ We are on the ground in these 60 countries where Christians suffer as a result of their faith.”

Curry spoke to *Charisma* about how Open Doors is supporting the persecuted church during the pandemic—and why it’s important

for believers to support the global church.

Global Persecution

Curry says Open Doors USA tries to meet the needs of persecuted Christian communities through local, existing emergency networks designed to provide basic resources, like food, water, blankets, clothing and medicine. Procuring these resources—which can be difficult for believers on the ground to procure under normal circumstances—has been particularly challenging during the pandemic, and not just because of scarcity.

During a time when essential services and rations are running thin, Curry says some governments have opted to systemically discriminate against Christians, ignoring their needs or denying them relief aid. He points to India—a country that few outsiders would associate with religious persecution—as an example of this practice.

“India has 65 million Christians, and ... it’s a group that has been increasingly persecuted,” Curry says. “We don’t often think of India as a place where Christians are persecuted, but since 2014, there’s been a 200% rise in incidents against Christians. That’s because the government itself has an agenda that wants to push out Christian faith. They’ve made that pretty clear. So a lot of these Christians are from lower castes. They’re held down. They’re laborers. They’re workers. And because of the shutdown, they’re greatly affected. That’s true across all parts of that class of worker, of course, during the shutdown. ... But what makes this a double whammy for them is then, as a Christian, they are considered ‘less than’ in another degree. So it’s like they’re doubly held against them. So they’re facing a restriction of food, care, relief, and it’s a very difficult time for Christians in that community.”

In places where systemic oppression was already taking place

against Christian communities, this added lack of resources can leave some communities—like the Syrian Christians—in desperate situations.

“In the northern parts, along Turkey, the Christians have been totally pushed out of that area ever since Turkey attacked along the border there,” Curry says. “So that means many of the Christians in that community are living in camps. And so then, of course, those aren’t always the best sanitary conditions. It’s hard for them to get food and water. So we’re trying to make sure that these Christian communities are not starved to death or cut off from the support they need.”

Beyond simply questions of access, active persecution also remains a major concern for these communities. Curry points to northern Nigeria as proof that anti-Christian persecution does not pause to observe social distancing protocols.

“Right now in the northern part of Nigeria, we have Christian communities—Christians who live in communities together in order for protection and otherwise,” Curry says. “They’re not only under sequester because of COVID-19, but they’re also still being attacked by Islamic groups like Boko Haram. We’ve had several attacks here in the last two to three weeks. They’re like sitting ducks. We need to make sure that they’re supported, that they’re cared for, that they have food, water, medical care, and that we raised the alarm about what’s happening to them.”

Curry says while needs differ from country to country, the overall picture is similar: Marginalized groups of Christians who need basic necessities in order to keep living and who are unable to count on aid from their government or local community. That’s where Open Doors steps in.

“If the devil or the enemy wants to isolate Christian communities and starve them out, this is the perfect condition in which to do that,” Curry says. “So we want to fight that

trend. We want to make sure that Christian communities are not isolated. We want to ensure they have not only some form of community in the middle of this, but also that they have the necessities of life to survive—rice, water, food, blankets—so that they can make it through. And hopefully over time, they'll survive and then thrive if we can help them in this way."

Be the Answer

Curry says there are multiple ways for believers in the U.S. to support these persecuted believers. For many people, the pandemic has led to a loss of employment or income, and those people may not be in a position to donate financially. Curry says that's OK; diligent and devoted prayer is one of the most valuable assets Christians can offer right now.

"Prayer is a powerful force," Curry says. "We have a prayer app called 'Pray for the Persecuted,' and it's on all the different platforms. There are tens of thousands of people who are using this app, and it's just updated immediate prayer requests and answers to prayer. You can send a prayer to the some of the people who are affected. There's a prayer wall there. ... I think that prayer is exceptionally valuable and maybe the most valuable thing we can do."

For those willing to intercede, Curry has a suggestion. Rather than trying to pray for every need in the world, he recommends focusing on one or two particular issues or nations that the Holy Spirit stirs you to pray for. This will allow believers to truly focus their prayers and attention over a long period of time and avoid burnout or fatigue.

"What I encourage people to do is find a country or a group of people that God has laid on their heart—if it's India, if it's Syria—and then pray for those people," Curry says. "Don't feel like you've got to solve everybody's problem. The reality is, God's laid somebody on your heart. I would love to see the

Western church really mobilize to help the persecuted church. These are our brothers and sisters. And they're being isolated and discriminated against because they're Christians. Many of them face prison or worse for publicly accepting Jesus."

For those who are more financially stable, Curry suggests donating to one of the many Open Doors projects operating in these affected regions. (To donate, readers can visit .)

"The COVID-19 rapid response for the persecuted church is for blankets, food, medical care and clothing for Christians who are marginalized in their communities," he says. "We're talking about places like India, Indonesia, southern Philippines—in these Muslim dominated areas where Christians are cut off. So it's very practical things. Our team is there. We're working. And it's a powerful testimony to these people that they're not forgotten. ... What you can be sure of is that in this crisis, we're not pulling back. We're doing everything we can do."

Curry says donating—whether with money or with time and prayers—is a good way to practice empathy for others and take the focus off of ourselves. When we help the persecuted church around the world, we are reminded that we belong not only to our local church, our denomination or our country, but to a global body of Christ.

"It's so easy to be self-focused," he says. "Because we've got problems. We've got challenges. ... I think, though, that for emotional and spiritual reasons, it's so good for us to get off our island and think about how we can help somebody who has it worse than we do—even if we've got it tough. If you don't have resources to support these people with medicine and food and other forms of relief, then you can certainly get folks together to pray or to share these stories on your [social media]. There are things you can do."

"I think taking some action is good for our spirit. Not only

that, it's biblical. Hebrews talks about this—that we pray for and care for people who are in prison for the name of Jesus, as if it were us or our own family. I think that's a universal calling. I think that's not just for one person or just for a unique situation there when that book was being written. I think that's true for us today."

Curry also says American Christians in particular should pay attention to the global church, because the persecution we observe overseas is likely to come to the United States someday.

"When you look around the globe, what you're seeing is the incidents and the issues that were facing the persecuted church are beginning to be faced by the Western church, so we can also learn from them—in their tough time—about what we're going to face and what we are facing now," Curry says. "I think you're going to have issues around COVID-19 and aggressive secularism and other things, which are going to come against Christians and make them seem like they're intolerant, which are going to try to strip them of some of their rights and their abilities. You've already seen things like this, where *The New York Times* is writing articles saying that Christian churches are the ones that are spreading this, where you have drive-in churches—which should by science be allowed to practice but are being shut down against their civil rights. All manner of things like this that the persecuted church has faced, we're going to face and are facing."

Above all, Curry hopes that believers will take this opportunity to do something—whether that means financial donations, activism or prayer in your own prayer closet—to help Christians who truly need help in this time. He says it's time to stand together as a unified church and love one another.

"With all that's going on, find those places that you're

stirred about,” Curry says. “Don’t let me or somebody else talk you into it. You’ll know when it’s the Lord, and if so, then take part in it, because I think what we’re finding out here is we need to be a global community and a global family. Sometimes we are separated. Sometimes we are at each other’s throats, even. You have all these different divisions within the faith. But I think these are times where we pull together and realize these are our brothers and sisters. It doesn’t matter what the denomination is. They’re being punished for following Jesus, for calling themselves sons and daughters of the Lord. And so let’s join together to help them and make sure they’re not cut off.” {eoa}

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