

A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation

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The Persecuted Church

Every Christmas in the United States, people seem to come out of the woodwork to object to displays of crèches and other uniquely religious Christmas decorations in public places, the singing of Christian carols in public school holiday programs, and even the use of the traditional greeting of “Merry Christmas.” The efforts to change the language of Christmas celebrations/observances into generic “holiday” language are lamented by many Christians as ongoing evidence of the secularization of American culture and the loss of our Christian heritage as a nation. Unfortunately, it seems to me that some American Christians seem almost to take on a persecution complex—as though this secularization (or recognition of the U.S.’s increasing religious pluralism) is an example of the persecution of Christians. I’m not sure it rises to that level.

What we face here in the U.S. pales in comparison to what Christians face in other parts of the world. Considering the situations of our Brethren in Christ brothers and sisters in places like Nepal, Bhutan and Zimbabwe, not to mention Christians in Vietnam, China, Sudan, Iraq, and other places, what is happening in the U.S. is not persecution. It might be worrisome, it might make us uncomfortable, and it might make us long for the days when there was more of an assumption in favor of Christian faith, but it is not persecution. We still have incredible religious freedom compared to many other places.

Persecution, as defined by Release International, is “a situation where people are repetitively, persistently and systematically inflicted with grave or

serious suffering or harm and deprived of...their basic human rights because of a difference...that the persecutor will not tolerate.” To differentiate religious persecution from other kinds, Release International suggests asking this question: “If a person had other religious beliefs or would change their religious to the majority religion of the country, would things get better for them.” If the answer is positive, then the persecution is for religious differences.

Release International is a Christian organization based in the United Kingdom that “serves the persecuted church around the world” by showing God’s compassion, serving God’s church, sharing God’s love, spreading God’s word, and speaking as God’s advocates by being the voice of the martyrs and the oppressed (from their web site, www.releaseinternational.org). Release International issues a prayer alert about every two weeks as part of their initiative to encourage prayer and action on behalf of Christians facing intense persecution in seven countries: China, Indonesia, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan and Vietnam.

This is not an exhaustive list, however, of the countries where Christians are routinely persecuted. According to the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, more than 200 million Christians in about 100 countries are denied human rights because of their faith, making the persecution of Christians the largest human rights violation in the world (www.worldevangelicalalliance.com). Most of the countries where persecution is pervasive are in the Middle East and Asia, with pockets of persecution also present in

northern Africa and the Pacific (Indonesia, etc.)

The persecuted church as a topic for *Shalom!* was in the tentative stages when I received an e-mail from Ken Abell, recently returned from a trip to visit the Brethren in Christ in Nepal. He told me of his promise to tell the story of the church in Nepal here in North America, and offered to write an article for *Shalom!* if it would fit with any of the upcoming themes. That was confirmation enough of the rightness of devoting an issue to the persecuted church. Ken’s article coming out of his trip and in keeping with his promise to the church in Nepal leads this edition. Then, in addition to more articles coming from various places where Brethren in Christ people face persecution and hardship are pieces from Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite World Conference (we’re members of both organizations) highlighting their efforts on behalf of and among Christians who are suffering persecution. Finally, two people reflect on persecution and religious freedom from a North American vantage point, and this edition’s book review highlights the work of *Voice of the Martyrs*.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39) 🍀

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

Heroes

By Ken R. Abell

All of what follows is true; it is a story about two heroes of mine. I met them in Nepal, where I was visiting as a member of a six-person team from across the denomination. We were interacting with church leaders and trying to be an encouragement. The reality is that we were the ones invigorated by those who serve Christ in unfriendly conditions where opposition can rapidly be transformed into violence.

I connected with leaders whose understanding of what it means to be motivated by an eternal perspective was so automatic that it was embodied in their actions—men and women who routinely face hostility in the midst of meager economic prospects, and respond to it not with whimpering or whining, but with determined grace. For us, “life is short and eternity is long” is a true statement, to which we pay lip-service; for these brothers and sisters, it is a tangible thing that emboldens them to walk the razor’s edge for the kingdom of God. Two men, M.S. and G.S., had a particularly strong impact on me. Before one can appreciate

the courageous nature of their lives, some background information needs to be understood.

M.S. and G.S. are key leaders in the Nepal Brethren in Christ Church, and are the point-persons for an outreach endeavor into Bhutan, which is one of the world’s least evangelized places. They have a matter-of-fact approach to the dictates of Scripture, and it was both convicting and energizing to hang out with them.

M.S. is an easy-going man with a quiet resolve to accomplish much for God’s glory. He was born and raised in an Orthodox Hindu family. He came to Christ at 16, sensed God’s call over a period of time, and has been actively involved in ministry since 1994. G.S. has all the personality traits and gifts of a natural leader. Along with a smile that lights up his entire face, he possesses the heart of a lion and the raw instincts of a warrior. Before coming to Christ, he was involved in drugs and criminal enterprises, engaging in the strong-arm tactics of a hit-man. In Christ, there remains a sense of urgency in his no-nonsense approach to life. But that doesn’t mean he is humorless. On the contrary, in the very best sense of the phrase, he is what my Grandma would have referred to as “a real character.”

In recent years, the Nepal Church has been tempered by a period of difficult personnel problems, and has emerged from it mobilized by a vital sense of purpose. Leadership prayed hard, and invested much energy in seeking solutions, reconciliation and healing. And throughout the troubles they kept focused; they are eagerly pressing on to advance the kingdom of God. Their efforts in Bhutan bear testimony to a vibrant spirituality that produces an unshakable fidelity to the Great Commission.

Bhutan is an isolated and landlocked Buddhist Kingdom in the eastern Himalayans, situated between India and China. The state religion is Lamaistic Buddhism, which developed near the end of the seventh century AD; it is influenced

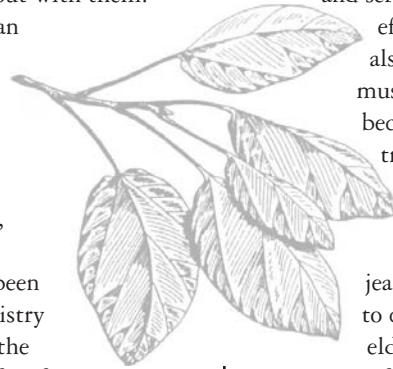
by Bon, a pre-Buddhist belief-system that has deeply-rooted elements of demon-worship. There is a slow-moving reform movement with hopes that progressive change is on the horizon in 2008, but as of this writing, it is very much a closed culture. Religious freedom is extremely restricted. By the law of the land, seeking converts to Christianity is strictly forbidden. Believers must hide themselves

and serve the Lord in secret. Their efforts to proselytize, and also their corporate worship must remain below the radar because sadly, no one can be trusted. Neighbors, friends and even family members will become informers for reasons ranging from petty jealousy, to tribal animosities, to currying favor with village elders, to outright hatred of Christianity. If a church

planter’s activities become known to government agents, they will be beaten or jailed.

Sounds like risky business, doesn’t it? Yet in this contentious climate, territory for the kingdom of God is being taken back from the thief who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” Prayerful perseverance coupled with a hunger for spiritual truth has resulted in dramatic growth; in one year the BIC work has increased from two house churches to seven. Hosting fellowship groups requires boldness that willingly defies danger and social disgrace. If the authorities discover a church is meeting in a home, the house will be destroyed and the family ostracized. Despite this repressive policy, there are now at least 200 baptized members in Bhutan, and plans are in place to plant churches in every district of the country. Seeds of hope are being scattered across the region with an intense dedication.

On our journey, we were privileged to make contact with the Bhutan Church. We spent an entire day traveling in two utilitarian vehicles over narrow roads pock-marked with cracks and pot-holes. It was a kidney-jarring ride that carried us to a rough border-town. We arrived near midnight and checked into a hotel that did



SHALOM!

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not have a five-star rating by any stretch of the imagination. A generous critic might give it one-star. It didn't matter. We were bone-tired, but full of anticipation.

At 9:30 the next morning, 14 of us—the team members from the West, the Nepal team, along with two pastors from Bhutan—crowded into a small bedroom. At first there was an awkwardness, which was soon swallowed up by an undercurrent of excitement swelling in the room; from my viewpoint the Lord's presence was as powerful as I have ever experienced. After preliminary introductions, one of the men from Bhutan named Lazarus stood to speak. He is the son of a Hindu priest, and received his first name when he was baptized as a Christ-follower in 1988. We were each presented with a silk scarf as he told us that all of this is the plan of God; he believes that our being there is a manifestation of God's love. There were many tears in people's eyes because of the realization that we are part of something so much bigger than we can possibly imagine. In that setting, to relearn that the body of Christ is universal and dependent on each other was a bit disconcerting. We listened and learned; it became abundantly clear that there is an ever-present threat when one stands up to be counted for Christ in this corner of the world.

What makes things even more dangerous

for M.S. and G.S. and our other Nepalese friends is the fact that Bhutan has a latent antagonism toward the Nepali population within its borders; an aggressive ethnic-cleansing has been promoted and carried out since 1990. Movement into Bhutan by citizens of Nepal is illegal. But that has not stopped or even slowed the strategic partnership between the Nepal Church and native Bhutanese leaders.

M.S. and G.S. routinely take desperate chances to travel into Bhutan to evangelize, train leaders and encourage the fledgling church. When the scope of their risk-taking and the extreme hazards involved became clear to us, we were quite alarmed, but they sloughed it off with confident shrugs. If their clandestine movements are ever uncovered by the powers-that-be in Bhutan, the consequences would be swift and drastic; they could be arrested, beaten and incarcerated without any regard to what we know as due process. We protested a bit more loudly, but their attitude and words silenced us. It was a goose-pimpling glimpse of first-century zeal, like standing with Peter and John in front of the Sanhedrin: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." M.S. and G.S. put it this way: "There is man's law. And there is God's law. We must be

obedient to God's law."

These heroes of the faith are planting churches where it is strictly forbidden to be Christian. They request that we pray for them. And they have their prayer priorities clearly defined; pray for their ministry and for God to be glorified. Reflecting on all this causes me to deeply consider a conscience-stirring question: What exactly did Jesus mean when he talked about to whom much is given much is required? Before my friendship with true heroes who live in peril for the sake of the kingdom of God, I thought I had a fairly reasonable idea of the answer to that, but not any more.

We, in the comfortable confines of affluence and freedom, have brothers and sisters on the front-lines who remind us that spiritual warfare is real and deadly. And we, the western church, shoulder a responsibility that we dare not shirk or dismiss. So I tell their story with much hope, and every time I think of them, I pray for them; I thank God for my heroes, M.S. and G.S. 🙏

Ken Abell is pastor of the Morrison (IL) Brethren in Christ Church. This article was developed from first-hand experience along with conversations with those people involved; it is presented at their request and with their consent. The initials of the heroes are used for security reasons.

Conversion is for the Brave

By Daniel Deyhle

Goa, the smallest Indian state, is also the most ethnically diverse. Five hundred years ago, Portugal chose to claim and conquer this coastal area because of its natural harbors. Unlike the rest of the sub-continent where the British ruled for economic and military purposes but left religion alone, the Portuguese policy was to absolutely force the Hindu population to convert to Catholicism. This was not so much out of concern for their souls as it was to make control of the people more uniform and secure.

What attracted the newcomers to Goa those many years ago now draws tourists from all over the world: a coastline of beaches and harbors, ease of travel, the temperate winter climate, and the economy. Today's foreign visitors create a need for

goods and services that has developed into a "tourist economy," making Goa a magnet for Indians from all other states where there are little or no opportunities. By the train load and bus load, Indians from every tribe, religion and costume converge in Goa to settle down and look for work. Despite their high hopes, there are relatively few jobs available.

Though the tourist population goes up and down with the seasons, Goa's Indian population has more than doubled in the past 10 years. The people who call themselves "Goans," the group that historically made up the Roman Catholic, office-holding and land-owning majority, have become outnumbered by Hindus and Muslims migrated from outside states. Sprinkled into this mixture are Parsees,

Sikhs, Buddhists, and a relatively small number of "Believers" (the Goan term for Evangelical Protestants).

When God called us to India more than 10 years ago, we were drawn to Goa because of the low cost of living and the potential of reaching the world for Christ. In this area, there can be no excuse for not getting the Good News out to the masses, but admittedly, there are many obstacles. Though the Church in the West faces many challenges, the opposition thrown at the Indian Church and evangelical Christians is so pervasive, it can only be called persecution.

As I stated before, most of Goa's immigrant population is Hindu or Muslim. Typically coming in family groups, when they arrive, they are illiterate and very

poor. Believing that Goa is the land of opportunity, they come hoping to improve their lot. Most will never experience this dream. Most end up in the day laborer lines where, if they get chosen, for their hard labor they will receive less than \$1 U.S. per day. By way of contrast, a good salary in Goa might net \$3. These struggling immigrants, constantly reminded that they are “outsiders” and undesirable in Goa, are held back on many fronts. More often than not, the employer, the landlord and the pimp will be a Goan Roman Catholic or a landed Hindu strongman. Workers have few rights, and are completely at the mercy of the boss.

It doesn't require much imagination to picture a wide spectrum of human rights abuses. But where people are trying to find any way to survive, you might as well throw out any Western concept of equal hiring, fair housing, minimum wage, not to mention minimum age for workers or free education for all. While it is a fact that India's economy is growing at double-digit numbers, it will be a very long time before profits and economic betterment touch the masses.

The economic problems are seemingly insurmountable. With almost every new person we meet, we find ourselves confronted by desperate circumstances. As our contacts and relationships grow, picture the situation with the added discrimination and persecution that Believers from any part of India will experience, and it should be obvious that in this country, the life of an Evangelical is no picnic.

Here in Goa, the name “Christian” is synonymous with Roman Catholic. All non-Catholics in the coastal belt experience discrimination by so-called Christians. Believers and Muslims both face difficulties and even out-right persecution at times. When a Catholic landlord discovers that an immigrant family has started to attend one of our Bible studies, he may evict the family from their tiny rented rooms. Sometimes when a church leader visits homes, the new Believers will suddenly experience increased tension from neighbors and relatives. Believers are discriminated against in hiring. And when a Believer does get a steady job, he or she will find that requests for time off to attend a meeting will routinely be denied. In Goa, a Hindu, Muslim, or Roman Catholic knows that there are problems to face when deciding to become an evangelical

Christian, and potentially even severe persecution.

Have we as foreign missionaries experienced or faced persecution in Goa? Yes, we have felt ostracism and known situations where people who were responding to our message suddenly reject us. During our earlier years here, many of the local Goans would call us names as we passed in the street. A few times we experienced direct attacks against ourselves, our church group, or our property. In January 2001, part way through a Christian drama that we had sponsored, two truck-loads of local men arrived and forced their way in to the rented hall, shouting threats, throwing things, and breaking all the windows. In just a few minutes, there were several injuries and much damage and loss of equipment. The attack had been instigated by the local parish priest. The police arrived but just stood by and watched. Back then, the police were all Catholics, and they would not arrest Catholics for attacking the “heretics.” The incident only made the news because several European tourists were in the audience. The police reluctantly filed our church's complaint, only because it was required for insurance claims.

Later, on a Sunday afternoon during the “off season,” the local people were stirred up to oppose our group purchasing a property. That day, the crowd completely destroyed one of the smaller buildings. The 80-year-old man who was wanting to sell the large building to our group was pulled out of his apartment, dragged through the street and into the Catholic church compound where the priest tried to force him to sign the property over to the diocese. This time the police intervened, and because the new chief was a Hindu,

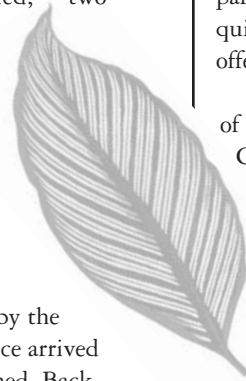
he brought in representatives from each side for questioning. He said he didn't understand why one Christian group would be attacking another Christian group. He then warned the priest that if any more such persecution takes place, he would hold him responsible. Those were tense years, but the outright attacks ended.

As we returned to this area every year, we continued to build relationships and gradually became accepted and even respected and appreciated by most of the local people. Some men who had previously participated in the attacks now would quietly warn us about rumors and even offer to “take care of the bad guys” for us.

We are always aware of the advantage of being Westerners with perceived wealth. Goa's economy depends on the tourist trade. But we are mindful that most of the people we are reaching out to now, the poor people coming into Goa, are easy targets for any local who wants to pick on someone. The Goan Catholics do not want to convert these poor Hindu and Muslim families; they just want them to leave the state and they blame all kinds of problems on them. When one of these “outsiders” becomes involved with our church, or becomes a Believer, it just makes some of the local Catholics more angry. They seemingly are not aware that with ever changing political climates, a day could come when they could be targeted for persecution as well.

On face value, in Goa there are few advantages to becoming a true follower of Jesus Christ. Here, conversion is for the very brave. ☹

Dan and Karen Deyble spend half of every year in Goa as missionaries with Everybody Ought to Know, their own organization affiliated with the Brethren in Christ Church. In the U.S., they live in Mechanicsburg, PA, and are members of the Harrisburg BIC Church.



Egyptian Lessons

By Andy Saylor

My wife and I were in Egypt in April 2006. We were there when the bombings happened, but were not anywhere near that town, Dahab.

We went because our daughter was serving for a year at an orphanage in Cairo, where she was placed through Mennonite Central Committee's SALT program. It's a wonderful opportunity for young people to serve around the world for a year. If you know someone who might be interested, the website is www.mcc.org/vep/salt.

When this column started, I thought since I am a Christian and would be writing from that perspective, I should first acknowledge that Christianity is not "the only game in town." In other words, when one lives in a place where Christians are the majority, it can be easy to forget, or not to respect, that there are persons of minority faiths (or no faith at all, of course) who are our neighbors and therefore persons we are called to love.

Going to Egypt gave me a chance to be a faith minority, and to talk to other Christians there, to hear what it is like for them in a country where Islam is the majority religion. It gave me respect for their struggles, and appreciation for the freedom of religion we have in the United States.

At one time, Egypt was predominantly Christian. But I was told that is not reported in the history books used at the public schools in Egypt.

The Egyptian Christians wonder and worry whether the apparently growing intensity of some Muslims will lead to increasing discrimination or worse. But there is still hope that they can co-exist peacefully, and that the Christians, who are said to be somewhere between one-tenth and one-sixth of the population, will be afforded meaningful opportunity in the culture, in the government, in business, in the years to come.

Forgive me for thinking I have any grasp of the complex Egyptian culture from our short visit. But it has been thought-provoking and so I just share these thoughts, and now will get to what I really want to say.

Our trip has powerfully, and I hope indelibly, hit me with the realization that

the freedoms we have, and our standard of living, are almost unbelievable. Indeed, to most of the world, what we have is almost unimaginable. The standard of living in Egypt is for the most part not nearly what we have here.

On a train ride, I spoke with three young Christian men who know that the U.S. has its faults, but who hunger for the opportunity to come here. They told me about the annual "diversity lottery" which the U.S. Department of State conducts. I was not aware of it. Fifty thousand people are given permanent visas to come live in the U.S. For the 2006 drawing, there were 6,300,000 entries for the 50,000 visas. These young men enter every year. Their eyes shone with the hope that despite the enormously long odds, their names might one day be chosen.

Please understand. I loved Egypt, and the people were wonderful and I believe for the most part content and happy with their lives. But at the same time, it helped me appreciate more what we have been given here in the States.

As I have thought since about what we have here, compared to the rest of the world, the verse that keeps coming to mind is, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). Eugene Peterson renders this verse in *The Message* like this: "Great gifts mean

great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!"

This is something Jesus says after telling parables about being ready when he returns. Will we be found to have acted responsibly, as good stewards of what we have been given, in accordance with his will? Or not?

It would be tempting to start imagining what a Christian in the United States in 2006 should do with the tremendous gifts we have been given. But rather than imagine it, or jump to any conclusions, I encourage us to first acknowledge that we have been given tremendous gifts, to acknowledge that we therefore have a tremendous responsibility, and to begin earnestly praying and talking with other Christians about how we should carry out that responsibility.

Are you sure you are already exercising your responsibility as the Lord wants you to? I am not sure about that. If you are like me, then, let us join in committing to take more seriously this God-given responsibility for these God-given gifts. 🙏

Andy Saylor is an attorney who practices in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, lives in Elizabethtown, and is a member of the Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church. This article was originally published in May 2006 in the column "Spirit Talk" that Andy writes for the local weekly paper, the Elizabethtown Chronicle.

Remaining Topics for 2007

Spring: "Profiles in Peacemaking," featuring stories and articles about people and organizations committed to peacemaking in various ways.

Summer: "Focus on Africa," highlighting the challenges and opportunities facing the continent where there the Brethren in Christ have been since 1898.

Fall: "Women in Ministry and Leadership," focusing on the work of the Brethren in Christ Council for Women in Ministry and Leadership, and how to encourage and enable divinely called women to use their ministry and leadership gifts to serve the church in pastoral and other roles.

Please contact me at bickhouse@aol.com with ideas for topics or writers on any of these topics. 🙏

Christ is the Way to Life

By Shemlal Hembrom

I am from the Santals tribe married to Hanna Soren (Hembrom); together we have two sons, Sadanand Hembrom (age 11) and Ashis Hembrom (age 9). The Santals are one of the major aboriginal tribes in Southeast Asia mainly scattered through the different states of India, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. They have retained their common culture and tradition, common language, and belief in common descent through myths and folklore. They also have simple music, dance and songs with a similar worldview and similar ideas about supernatural forces. Yet they adopted Hindu rituals and practices, especially those who are in Nepal (which was the only Hindu country in the world). Although Santals have faith in supernatural powers, they worship Hindu gods and goddesses and also practice the Hindu rituals.

I was born in a Santal family at Hatibandha, Nepal, and grew up in a tribal family that believed both in Hinduism and tribal faith and rituals. According to the Santals' faith, all boys 14-16 must take a stain on their left wrist in order to get eternal life or else they will be thrown into eternal fire after death. So when I turned 14 my grandfather asked me to take a stain. I was not only afraid to burn my wrist but also worried about how to get rid of the eternal fire when I die. It compelled me to think seriously and ask many questions, such as: Will the stain of fire help me to escape from eternal fire (hell) and lead me to eternal life (heaven)? If so, why do other people not practice the same thing? Why do different people have different faiths and practices to get eternal life? Why there are many ways if there is only one God? Which one is the right way? I became restless to find the way to escape from the eternal fire. There was no peace in my heart.

As I was struggling with such questions in my mind, I found a small booklet that had been lying in my home for more than 16 years left by a Brethren in Christ missionary from Bihar, India. It was John's gospel. God spoke to me through John 3:16. I got assurance of the eternal life but did not understand fully until I attended a Christian marriage near our village. The pastor at the marriage used the opportunity to share the gospel. I was convinced and

accepted Christ as my personal Savior and also the same day after the service I was baptized. I went as an observer to the Christian marriage (to see how they do it) but came back home as a believer of Christ.

Not only was it a crime for me to become a follower of Christ according to Nepal's law, but I was also rejected by my family and society. So I had to leave my home for two years and lived with my maternal uncle. During those two years I visited some of my relatives and also my parents occasionally to share about my faith in Christ, and I was praying for them. As a result after two years many of our relatives and also my parents accepted Christ as their Savior. So now I came back home and continued my education in Biratnagar Morang Campus (College). I did not stop visiting my relatives to witness Christ whenever I had a free time from the College. After two years my grandmother also received Christ as her Savior before she died.

As the number of believers was increasing day by day, God spoke to me to prepare myself to lead the believers and also witness about Christ more effectively. So I joined the Bible College in India to understand the Word of God more meaningfully. Slowly and secretly the believers were increasing in number but believers could not be secret any longer. When I was in my final year of theological study, my father and sister were arrested and taken into police custody. The police also confiscated all my theological books that I had received from the Bible College in previous year. Persecution increased all over the country, many were beaten badly, dragged to the temple and threatened to be killed if they did not renounce Christ and worship idols of the temple; some were put into prison. After my graduation from the Bible College in 1987, I dedicated myself to serve the Lord as a full-time worker. In spite of difficulties and persecution, the church in Nepal continued to grow.

Thank God that despite persecution we have experienced tremendous church growth from 27 believers in 1949 to around 500,000 in 3,000 churches by now. The Brethren in Christ Church has played a significant role in multiplying

churches in Nepal. The BIC Church is one of the largest organized churches in eastern Nepal. Since 1995, I as secretary have an opportunity to partner with East Nepal Outreach Network (ENON). According to the report of ENON in east Nepal there are more than 100,000 believers in 700 churches. But still there are 3,200,000 people who do not know Jesus as their Savior. The BIC Church has a goal to establish five churches among unreached people groups in unreached areas each year. The BIC Church aims to reach out our neighboring countries such as Bhutan, Bangladesh and Tibet. We have already established two churches in Bhutan.

Twelve years of Maoist revolt against the system of monarchy in the country brought a development and financial crisis in the country, and there was a direct bad effect on church activities. During that period no one was certain of reaching designated places for any work and come back home safely. In October 2005, my wife Hanna was traveling back to our home by bus; the bus was stopped by the Maoists and all passengers were ordered to get out, turn their back and run. God's protective hand was on them: although the bus was burned, no one was killed but they had to walk on foot with their bags to reach home. Such incidents, bombings and killings were common all over the country. Many people in the country and around the world were praying for peace and political stability in Nepal. As result, at the end of 2006 the king stepped down and the Nepal was declared a secular country. Now we have religious freedom and have a greater opportunity to witness about Christ openly. On December 20, 2006 we had a challenging Christmas music program in the open stadium of Biratnagar (the second largest city of Nepal) where more than 60,000 people gathered (some reported about 100,000 participants). Thank God for the opportunity to share the gospel through music and testimony as well as the Word of God on that special program.

Yet there is no guarantee that Nepal will remain a secular nation for the long-term until it is fully approved by a constitutional assembly in June 2007. Before the constitutional assembly takes

place, tension is again present between hilly and Terai (plain land) people of Nepal. This has created another problem—a Nepal band (strike) in the plain area recently. We have our SPICE hostel in Biratnagar where 113 children live. If this strike continues for a long time it will be very

difficult to provide food for the children since all shops are closed. We cannot send them home also because of a transportation strike. There is no sign of quick resolution of the problem. This will certainly hinder the church activities. Therefore please pray for the ministry of BIC Church and

also for political stability and peace in the country. 🙏

Shemlal Hembrom is secretary of the Brethren in Christ Church in Nepal.



Mennonite Central Committee

Nepalese Christian Leader Sees Hopeful Signs in War-Wearied Country

By Tim Shenk

There are growing signs of peace and religious freedom in Nepal, according to Dr. Tirtha Thapa, a Nepalese Christian leader.

Nepal's civil war appears to be ending peacefully after a decade of violence between Maoist rebels and Nepal's royal government, Dr. Thapa reports. Additionally, Nepal's Christian minority, which makes up about two percent of the population, is gaining greater acceptance after facing persecution in the 1980s, Dr. Thapa says.

Dr. Thapa directs Human Development and Community Services, a Nepalese Christian organization supported by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

Human Development and Community Services operates five community hospitals that served people from all sides in the civil war. Sometimes, one of the hospitals was threatened by the conflict, such as when Maoist rebels demanded money from it to finance their operations.

"Quite often, I used to be threatened for my life," Dr. Thapa says.

However, Dr. Thapa repeatedly persuaded the rebels to let the hospital operate without any interference—sometimes by going to their jungle hideouts to plead his case. Dr. Thapa argued that the hospital served the entire

community and would need to close if any funds were taken.

"They said, 'OK, you should continue,'" he recalls. "They said, 'As you are not making any discrimination in the hospital, just continue the service without discrimination.'"

MCC supports Human Development and Community Services by providing one worker who serves as a consultant to the organization.

Over the past 10 years, the Nepalese Civil War has caused more than 13,000 deaths. On November 21, 2006, Nepal's government and its Maoist rebels signed a peace agreement, promising to end the conflict and paving the way for national elections.

Nepal has long been known as the world's only Hindu kingdom, Dr. Thapa says, but this may be changing. Not only is the future of Nepal's monarchy uncertain, but there is a growing acceptance of faiths other than Hinduism, Nepal's official religion.

During the 1980s, Nepalese Christians were routinely imprisoned for evangelizing in their country. Dr. Thapa recalls that the penalties were six years' imprisonment for converting someone to Christianity, three years for attempting to convert someone and one year for becoming a Christian

oneself.

However, this is no longer the case, Dr. Thapa says. Nepalese Christians are now able to practice their faith more openly and are gaining respect for their work in health care and other social services.

"From such bad persecution, we are coming to be recognized as a community that is making a difference for the poor and needy and sick persons," he says. 🙏

Tim Shenk is a writer for MCC communications.

The Voice of the Martyrs: A Magazine of Challenge and Hope

Reviewed by Lois Saylor

Pakistan. Indonesia. India. China. Vietnam. Columbia. This is a list of countries featured in the December 2006 issue of *The Voice of the Martyrs*, a magazine and an advocacy group for the persecuted church all over the world. In fact, the associated mission's organization, International Christian Association, works in over 50 countries. A special "40 years of Fellowship" issue for 2007 gives a summary of all the countries in which they work from Afghanistan to Yemen.

The Voice of the Martyrs or VOM tells the stories of martyred Christians and their families and churches. While the stories of beatings, killings, beheadings, church burnings, governmental crackdowns, and imprisonment can be difficult, the magazine also offers hope through the courage and love for Jesus the persecuted church exemplifies. The personal testimonies of those who tell their stories is challenging but uplifting too. Most importantly to those of us safe in North America it offers something even more. It offers the chance to be actively supportive of our sisters and brothers suffering all over the globe.

Many of the stories have "happy" endings in that those being persecuted have been helped by having their stories told and by practical help such as medical care through VOMedical, relocation, and money for basic needs; and the readers can help by contributions of money or supplies or by writing letters to prisoners. VOM reports that the letters have an effect on the treatment of the prisoners as it becomes evident to their jailers that their stories are known and people are aware of their plight.

One story tells the tale of a group of young women students attacked on the way to Christian school. Only one survived the machete attack. The story is introduced by a reminder of Paul's words in Romans: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Romans 8:35)

The young woman Noviana has a machete scar across her cheek that extends

to the back of her neck. The idea that even a sword will not separate her from the love of Christ is not theoretical. It is her experience, a part of her life as a Christian woman in a hostile world.

VOM negotiated her safe travel to a hidden place to receive medical attention to damaged nerves, a dislocated jaw, loosened teeth, and treatment to the scar itself. As she struggles with the emotional and mental scarring of witnessing the brutal murder of three friends, she continues to follow Christ. The sword was powerless to separate her from her Lord just as Paul tells us.

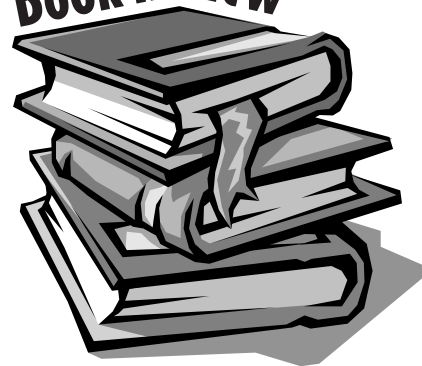
Our response does not need to be one of despair that terrible things happen. Nor should it be only relief that someone is out there helping. Our response should be and can be one that truly helps when terrible things happen. *The Voice of the Martyrs* offers ways that your concern and love can make a difference in the lives of the persecuted church. Take advantage of this opportunity.

The Voice of the Martyrs

Web site: www.persecution.com

- The web site offers lots of information. It can be overwhelming. Take it slowly and focus in prayerfully on an aspect of the ministry in which God may be calling you to invest yourself.

Book Review



Prisoners. Pastors. Bibles. Kids. A particular country.

- There are opportunities for giving, sending packets, or volunteering.
- There are resources for information and for sharing – books, videos etc.

Children's Web site:

www.kidsofcourage.com

- This sight also has stories and resources that you may find suitable for Sunday School classes and youth groups.
- A new video coming out is about youth who traveled to Vietnam to meet the underground church. It may be a good challenge for your youth group.

Contact information for Voice of the Martyrs: P.O. Box 443, Bartlesville, Ok 74005-0443; phone: 918-337-8015; e-mail: thevoice@vom-usa.org. ☺

Lois Saylor serves on the editorial committee for Shalom! and attends the Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church.

Statement from The Voice of the Martyrs

Our main purposes are based on Hebrews 13:3: Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

1. To encourage and empower Christians to fulfill the Great Commission in areas of the world where they are persecuted for their involvement in propagation the gospel of Jesus Christ. We accomplish this by providing Bibles, literature, radio broadcasts, medical assistance and other forms of aid.
2. To give relief to the families of Christian martyrs in these areas of the world.
3. To equip local Christians to love and win to Christ their enemies who are opposed to the gospel in countries where believers are actively persecuted for their Christian witness.
4. To undertake projects of encouragement, helping believers rebuild their lives and Christian witness in countries that have formerly suffered communist oppression.
5. To emphasize the fellowship of all believers by informing the world of atrocities committed against Christians and by remembering their courage and faith. ☺

The Suffering Church in Zimbabwe

By Bruce Khumalo

Where is God? Zimbabwean inflation has risen to about 1300 percent. This is abnormal and continues to directly affect the church. Friends, the Church in Zimbabwe is suffering. The current drought has added salt on our wound. When a nation suffers, the Church suffers as well. The children of Israel suffered in Egypt; now the Church in Zimbabwe joins the long history of God's suffering people. We suffer from lack of bread, water, jobs, etc to make ends meet. So, where is God when His people suffer?

The Church continues to pray to God but suffering increases day in and day out. We need a voice of encouragement from our sisters and brothers across the globe. Help us answer this question: where is God?

Despite these challenges, we must live by Christian principles in midst of our suffering and cry out to God. Any suffering Church has needs. When we pray to God, we must all present our needs to Him.

Church Leadership

Our Church leaders unfairly struggle to point out the evils committed by the rulers, with some Church leaders being investigated, detained, and sanctioned to force silence. The Church in Zimbabwe is living under fear of being classified as a political movement or enemy of masses.

Church Freedoms

The Church survives under an undeclared marshal law. There is freedom of speech, but no freedom after speech. Fear to speak truth has curtailed the power of the Church to stand for truth. The Church can no longer freely conduct its activities without looking over their shoulders, causing the Church to suffer from both emotional and psychological warfare.

Church Membership

Adding to our Church suffering, a good number of professionals have left Zimbabwe for greener pastures in self-imposed Diaspora. These are the people who assisted churches with professional

ideas, leadership and revenue collection. Will others rise to fill this void in the Church?

Economic Issues

The challenges facing people are great. The majority of our members live under the poverty line, now at \$350,000 (Zimbabwe dollars). Most people earn around \$100,000. This condition has led to ever increasing numbers of students unable to pay school fees, the expansion of preventable diseases in our homes, and rapidly increasing criminal behavior within our communities, including criminal acts by Church members. Embezzlement of funds is now common. Even churches have become targets for criminal break-ins.

Education

The Church used to be at the foundation of education, but now most children of the school age have no money for school fees, books, and other educational requirements.

Health

High risks of diseases and starvation plague our homes. The cost of drugs compels the Church members to be sick. HIV/AIDS continues to spread as people live immorally. Grandparents and the

elderly in our families now look after children.

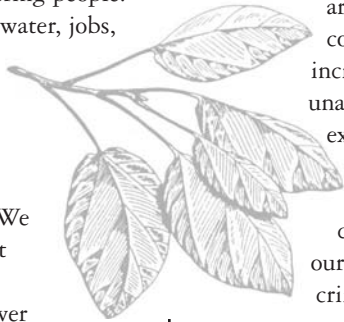
Transportation

We hardly need to mention the transportation problem emanating from the lack of foreign currency to import fuel. Five liters of gas now costs about \$25,000, and those depending on public transportation pay \$60,000+ a month. As a result of these prices, people walk long distances to and from work and church. Employers and pastors have to contend with very tired people.

Where is God? He is Among Us All

These situations in Zimbabwe depict a very devastated society and Church overwhelmed by worry, seemingly making the Church incapacitated. So, friends, where is God? Despite all this suffering, God's grace is sufficient. The Church has its standing obligation to love God and one another according to scripture. Let us pour out God's love to our God, our Church and to our communities. It is our hope that God will give us the strength to meet these challenges and that he will intervene on our behalf. 🍀

Bruce Khumalo is the former principal of Ekuphileni Bible Institute and now director of programs for "Amagugu Evangeli," the radio ministry of the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe.



Mennonite World Conference Vice President Pleads for Help for Zimbabwe

By Ferne Burkhardt

“The challenges facing our nation do not seem to want to go away,” Danisa Ndlovu, Bishop of the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe, told Mennonite World Conference officers and executive staff at a California meeting in January. “Each day seems to bring more hardships.”

Ndlovu is asking the MWC global family to continue to pray for his country and his church and to make solidarity visits to Zimbabwe. He also requested financial assistance for the BICC Peace Committee and MWC’s help in creating a Peace, Social Justice and Ethics desk to serve Zimbabwe and other African countries.

MWC officers at the California meeting agreed to send a “Koinonia Team” to visit Zimbabwe in 2007 to build community through presence, prayer and encouragement. Volunteers for the team will be considered along with selected participants.

Ndlovu, vice-president and president-elect of MWC, described increasingly devastating political, economic and social conditions. To address the situation, three major Christian church groups in Zimbabwe are banding together for new action. The Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, of which the BICC is a member, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop’s Conference are calling for dialogue among all sectors of Zimbabwean people both inside and outside the country to construct a national vision for future governance in the country.

The church groups have jointly produced a discussion document titled “The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe” which the church groups presented to President Robert Mugabe. They are hoping all stakeholders, not only churches, will take ownership of the process.

The proposed extension of Mugabe’s term to 2010 appears to be creating division within the ruling party and resistance by the opposition and civic groups, which adds to the anxiety in a nation where there is little political tolerance.

Under Mugabe’s leadership in recent years the country has spun into sharp decline. Professional people continue to leave. The economic situation fuels corruption, unemployment is still at 80 percent, inflation continues at 1,200 percent, the highest in the world, and life expectancy is now about 38 years.

Health delivery is compromised. Hospitals have few if any drugs. The sick are sometimes being asked to hunt for medical prescriptions in the market and then take the medicine to the hospital for their treatment. One ray of hope is the report that the rate of HIV/AIDS infections is decreasing, but the pandemic continues with an increasing number of orphans as a result.

Many of the thousands of people made homeless by the 2005 “Restore Order/

Clean Up” still have no homes. The promised new homes have mostly gone to government employees and friends. New “clean-up” operations have left more people homeless. Ndlovu reported that on a December trip to Harare, the capital city, he saw people “who had piled their belongings, some along the road, praying for transport... to who knows where,” their huts smouldering or in flames.

“We are praying that this cup of suffering will go away,” said Ndlovu. ☺

Ferne Burkhardt is Mennonite World Conference news editor. Mennonite World Conference is a communion (Koinonia) of Anabaptist-related churches, including the Brethren in Christ, linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness.

Editor's Notes

2006 Financial Report

Balance as of December 31, 2005:	\$3,517
Income in 2007:	\$4,405
Expenses in 2007:	\$5,131
Balance as of December 31, 2006:	\$2,791

In recent years, subscription numbers have declined, and even though we were able to meet our 2006 expenses, income was less than expenses. However, as long as we are able to meet expenses, we plan to continue publishing, believing that the wide-ranging topics covered by *Shalom!* are important ones for the church to consider.

2007 Subscription Renewal

You should have received the 2007 subscription renewal letter by now. If your label says 2006, you need to renew your subscription in order to continue receiving *Shalom!* Our basic subscription price remains at \$15, and we also ask you to consider making an extra contribution. Those extra contributions—in amounts of \$25, \$50, \$100, or whatever you can afford—help us continue sending a complimentary copy to each Brethren in Christ congregation in North America and to each BIC student at Messiah College. A number of missionaries and sister organizations also receive complimentary copies. Anything you give above \$15 is tax-deductible. Please also consider giving a gift subscription to someone you know who is interested in the kind of issues explored in *Shalom!* ☺

American Christians and the Persecuted Church

By Rachel Petersen

Stories of religious persecution and martyrdom have always haunted me. From an early age I was fascinated by accounts of Christians willing to endure marginalization, torture, and even death for their faith, whether in first-century Palestine, the Protestant Reformation, Nazi Germany, or countries around the world today. Learning about the faithfulness these believers demonstrated in the face of such unimaginable suffering has often kept me awake at night, wondering whether I could ever endure such hardships for the sake of Christ.

Growing up in a comfortable New England suburb, I didn't encounter many opportunities to "take up my cross" in a tangible way. Nevertheless, I interpreted some of the challenges I faced as a born-again Christian living in 20th century America as somewhat akin to the persecution endured by Christians in other parts of the world, however disparate in scale. I think it somehow eased my conscience to know that—if my Christian brothers and sisters around the world were willing to die for their faith—I was at least willing to endure the embarrassment and rejection that resulted from wearing my faith on my sleeve in a public school.

My church community at the time validated this perspective by teaching me to beware of the increasingly anti-Christian culture in which we lived. The leaders of my high school youth group worked diligently to mold me and my peers into "soldiers of the cross" who would bear witness to the Truth. I recall feeling particularly righteous when three of us boldly determined to form a prayer club at our public high school, preparing to fight tooth and nail with any administrator who stood in our way. To our surprise (and perhaps disappointment) our club was granted immediate approval and provided a classroom in which to hold our meetings.

Less than a year later, however, we were appalled when the same administration allowed another student group to organize a Day of Silence to show solidarity with

marginalized homosexuals. Along with the other members of my prayer club, I braced myself for what appeared to be a direct affront to my beliefs and—given the immense peer pressure I felt to embrace the ideology of those organizing the Day of Silence—my first bona fide experience of "persecution" at school. At the time, it didn't occur to me that the liberty I trumpeted in my efforts to form a prayer club was the same freedom that entitled these other students to organize their demonstration.

What was perhaps most unfortunate about my hastiness to identify with the persecuted church in this situation was my corresponding readiness to regard those who participated in the Day of Silence as the agents of my persecution, and therefore my enemies. In reality, none of the students who organized the Day of Silence hated me, nor did they intend to hurt me. On the contrary, they would have welcomed honest conversation about the issue, had I been willing to view the situation as an opportunity for dialogue, rather than an ideological attack. But because I was conditioned to view this experience through the lens of (what some have called) an American Christian persecution complex, I rejected the opportunity for open communication and instead built a wall around myself, bunkered down in my faith fortress, and prepared for battle with my enemies.

Today, when I hear American Christians bemoan the "tyranny of the minority" and the increasingly anti-religious nature of our society, I'm reminded of my high school experience, and it makes me wonder whether there's a healthier, more Christ-like mentality with which we could approach the challenges of living in a diverse society. I wonder how helpful it is for those of us who have enjoyed the privileges of mainstream religious dominance for the entirety of U.S. history to so quickly to cry "persecution" when we lose some of those privileges. I wonder whether we—comfortably situated in our



suburban homes, surrounded by church steeples on practically every corner, with money in our wallets that boldly states "In God We Trust" and a president on television ending nearly every speech with a petition for God to bless America—I wonder whether we have any right to self-assuredly align ourselves with a Church that was birthed in the margins.

We demonize foreign governments that attempt to keep this Church in the margins by denying Christians the freedom to practice their religion, but how graciously do we extend these same liberties to people who inhabit the fringe of our own society? Not well, if we deride everything that doesn't conform to our Judeo-Christian values as un-American. When American Christians raise a public outcry over Keith Ellison being sworn into the U.S. Congress on a Quoran, are we not succumbing to the same powers of fear, misunderstanding, and hatred that lead to the persecution of Christians in other parts of the world?

Jesus offers a better way. Perfect love, we're told, casts out fear. As true followers of Christ, we have a message of hope to offer a divisively pluralistic world, and that message is not "you're either for us or you're against us." The message, as lived by Christ, is that we can love those who are different from us. We can even love those who hate us. Perhaps the cross we must learn to bear is the humility it takes to do so. ☺

Rachel Petersen lives and works at Paxton Ministries in Harrisburg, PA, and is an active member of the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church.

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Vietnam Congregation Continues to Meet after Conflict with Local Authorities

The Mennonite house church in Ho Chi Minh's District 2 continues to meet in the home of Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang after the recent third dismantling of part of the building in the last eighteen months. Thirty to forty people meet each Sunday.

On Tuesday morning, January 9, 2007, when a group of believers were gathered for prayer, a large force sent by the precinct officials came to the house and tore out most of the improvements done in the house renovation this past summer. Though Quang argued that their actions were illegal, the authorities arrested and held 17 persons for several hours until completing their work. The church members were then all released and no charges were filed.

This confrontation is the latest incident in a long tug-of-war between this local congregation and the local precinct.

In July 2004, shortly after Pastor Quang and five others were arrested, authorities tore down a few meters at the end of the building which they claimed was built beyond their property. Temporary repairs were then made. After an international gift was offered to make permanent repairs, Quang submitted a request to repair and upgrade the building. The precinct authorities in May 2006 issued a building permit to repair the building, but

stipulated that no additional alterations were to be made.

When it became evident that Quang was raising the roof and making a new upstairs loft, local authorities forcibly tore down some of this construction and confiscated the building materials. However, the city officials ordered the precinct to return the materials, and the renovations continued. In September the chairman of the precinct government issued a statement to Quang indicating that he had made renovations not authorized by the building permit.

On January 2 the precinct chairman, Nguyen Van Hai, ordered that the "illegal" renovations be removed, and later asked to meet to discuss the matter with Pastor Quang. Quang went away for some oversight responsibilities with other pastors, and did not meet with Mr. Hai. On January 5 the chairman issued an order stating that the authorities would come on January 9 to remove the parts of the building they claimed were built illegally.

Quang maintains that the building was first erected by a previous owner in 1986, and that 90 percent of the buildings in that area were built without building permits. He maintains that the authorities selectively enforce newly enacted zoning laws to restrict the free association of

religious groups, and particularly the Mennonite group that Quang leads.

Some observers note that the local authorities did not move against the church last summer while Vietnam was asking to be removed from the U.S. State Department list of "countries of particular concern" due to religious liberty and human rights issues, and because Vietnam was seeking membership in the World Trade Organization. Now that Vietnam has achieved these aims, it appears that authorities have fewer inhibitions in restricting religious groups.

Others, citing growing freedom of Christian house churches to register their meeting places, observe that Quang might be specifically targeted due to his outspoken criticism of the government's policies concerning religious groups. In April he identified with a group calling for an end to the sole political leadership of the Vietnam Communist Party.

Mennonite World Conference (MWC) asks the worldwide church to pray for the churches and the authorities in Vietnam. MWC is a communion of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness. 🌱