



Center for Religious Liberty
at Family Research Council



HOW YOU CAN ADVANCE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: A GUIDE TO TAKING ACTION

by Arielle Del Turco



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OUR MISSION:

The Center for Religious Liberty exists to cultivate religious freedom for every person worldwide.

WHAT WE BELIEVE:

We believe that religious liberty is the freedom to hold religious beliefs of one's choice and to live according to those beliefs. While it was foundational to the formation of the United States of America, religious freedom is not merely an American right, but an inherent human right for all people of all faiths everywhere.

Of all people, Christians understand that we must have freedom to choose God, who does not want belief to be forced or compelled. Ensuring religious freedom is vital to affirming human dignity and treating each person with respect. Therefore, we seek to expand the freedom to choose one's faith, and live it out, as a fundamental human right.

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*“Great indeed are our opportunities; great also is our responsibility.”
– William Wilberforce*

Humans are inherently drawn to seek out answers to life’s biggest questions and to find meaning beyond this temporal existence. Religious freedom protects the ability to search for those answers and express them through faith.

Sadly, religious freedom is under attack around the world like never before. An estimated 5.2 billion people live in countries that experience serious violations of religious freedom.¹

Affirming the dignity of the human person requires countries to allow individuals to live out their faith in the public square according to their conscience without government restrictions or social harassment.

Who are the victims of religious freedom violations? Anyone being intimidated, harassed, attacked, or legally restricted for practicing their faith. The faces of persecution are diverse.

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requires countries to allow individuals to live
out their faith in the public square.*

Wang Yi, the pastor of a house church in China, is currently serving a nine-year prison sentence on false national security charges.² Huma Younus, a Pakistani Christian teenager, is trapped in the house of her abductor, who forced her to convert to Islam and sign marriage documents.³ Gulshan Abbas, a retired Uyghur doctor, is being arbitrarily detained along with another one to three million Uyghur Muslims in China.⁴ Leah Sharibu, a Nigerian Christian teenager, is being held hostage by Boko Haram for refusing to deny her faith.⁵ These are just a few cases of ongoing religious persecution worldwide.

Religious freedom is a basic human right and one worth protecting. The persecuted—especially those living under highly restrictive authoritarian regimes—are often prevented from advocating for themselves, so the responsibility to speak up on their behalf falls on those of us living in free societies.

The proper Christian response to dire human rights crises around the world should be “What can I do?” This resource is intended as a starting point for answering that question and thinking about how you might support the persecuted and advance international religious freedom.

BECOME INFORMED

Learning is the first step of any effective advocacy. To make a difference, you need to know what is happening. Here are several tips for becoming better informed:

- **Learn about the countries with some of the worst religious freedom conditions.** A helpful resource is Open Doors’ annual World Watch List, which ranks the top 50 most dangerous places to be a Christian.⁶
- **Follow the work of organizations that monitor and report on global religious freedom trends** (including Family Research Council). World Watch Monitor and International Christian



Concern do a good job reporting stories that go uncovered by mainstream media outlets. Follow the social media accounts of organizations and individuals that advocate for international religious freedom.

- **Listen to the stories of individuals who have stood for their faith against great odds** to develop a detailed picture of what life is like for religious believers in persecuted contexts. Christian pastor Andrew Brunson,⁷ Yazidi survivor Nadia Murad,⁸ Romanian lawyer Virginia Prodan,⁹ house church leader Bob Fu,¹⁰ and North Korean defector Joseph Kim¹¹ have all written powerful books recounting their experiences.
- **Seek to understand how state and non-state actors impede religious freedom.** Do your research. The U.S. State Department releases a report each year on the religious freedom conditions in every country aside from the United States.¹² The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) releases an annual report on the world's worst violators of religious freedom and offers recommendations for what the U.S. government can do to address them.¹³
- **Observe international current events generally to understand the contexts of religious freedom issues around the world.** Religious media outlets are typically better about covering international religious freedom. However, you can contact any mainstream media outlets you follow and ask for better coverage of religious freedom issues worldwide. Contact them directly or tag them on social media. News media is a business, and they want to satisfy their readers, listeners, and viewers. So let them know the type of content you want to see.

Learning about the challenges others face is important to developing empathy, which should spur us on to engagement.

SHARE THE THINGS YOU CARE ABOUT

Everyone has a circle of influence. You probably impact the opinions of those around you more than you think. Your home, school, workplace, and church are full of people interested in what you have to say. Passion can be infectious. Let your friends and family members know about the issues you think are important.

Practical Ways to Share About Religious Freedom

Look for ways to naturally express your compassion for the persecuted and oppressed.

- If you are reading a good book about an individual who has faced persecution, share it with your friends or recommend it to your book club.
- Suggest saying a prayer for a country in crisis or a specific victim of persecution at your Bible study.
- When your college class is asked to write a policy paper, write on the importance of promoting religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy.
- If you write for a school newspaper, pitch a piece on religious freedom.

Ways to Promote Religious Freedom on Social Media

In this digital age, social media is one of the primary venues through which people express what they care about.

- Share articles about situations that move you on your social media accounts.
- Follow activists, journalists, and others who care about international religious freedom. This will keep you informed on developments and opinions that do not always make it into news stories. When you find a community of people who care about the things you do, it will encourage you and remind you that you are not alone.

How to Keep It Upbeat

Talking about international religious freedom does not have to be a discouraging topic. The resilient faith of persecuted believers is something from which to take inspiration. Furthermore, believers who live in persecuted contexts have a lot to teach us about our faith. Churches and individuals living amid external pressures often develop creative ways to hold church services and practice their faith. When churches in the West face new challenges, we can learn from the way Christians abroad adapt to similar challenges in their own countries.

The persecuted church is also forced to think more deeply about how they are to rightly live out their faith when it is dangerous to do so. Their reflections can provide valuable insights on how Christians might respond when their freedom of conscience is challenged.

The persecuted church has much to teach us about living for Christ if we are humble enough to learn from them.

Reflections of the persecuted church can be found in Chinese pastor Wang Yi's "Declaration of Faithful Disobedience." He wrote these words in a statement to be released upon his arrest in 2019: "If I am imprisoned for a long or short period of time, if I can help reduce the authorities' fear of my faith and of my Savior, I am very joyfully willing to help them in this way... I hope God uses me, by means of first losing my personal freedom, to tell those who have deprived me of my personal freedom that there is an authority higher than their authority, and that there is a freedom that they cannot restrain, a freedom that fills the church of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ."¹⁴ Today, he remains in prison.

These words describe a passion all Christians should have for our faith. The persecuted church has much to teach us about living for Christ if we are humble enough to learn from them.

REACH OUT

Saint Augustine once wrote, “You cannot love what you do not know.” If we view persecuted groups around the world as an abstract concept, we will not feel or act as we should towards them. The solution is both simple and intimidating: reach out.

Meet and support missionaries who work in challenging areas. If your church does not already sponsor missionaries, ask your pastor if you can start. This will sow into the spiritual development of communities overseas and apprise your congregation about various needs around the world.

Your Contact Makes a Difference

If you know someone living in a persecuted context, stay in touch. Oppressed people often feel forgotten by the rest of the world.

- When one British human rights advocate simply thought to phone a Christian Pakistani contact, Shahbaz Bhatti, he was overjoyed, and said, “Thank God you called. The community is terrified. They are expecting an attack at any moment, and they think no one in the outside world knows or cares. The mere fact that you called means I can reassure them that there is one person out there who



does know, who does care, who is praying, and who is speaking out and trying to help.”¹⁵ The attack they feared never came, but Bhatti was later assassinated for his outspokenness on human rights issues.¹⁶

Contact with the persecuted church is a source of encouragement for them.

- When Dutch missionary Brother Andrew smuggled Bibles into the Soviet Union for churches there, the Christians he served were greatly encouraged that people around the world knew about their hardships and cared enough to send Bibles to them.¹⁷

Even Snail Mail Makes a Difference

Open Doors, the ministry Brother Andrew founded, and Voice of the Martyrs occasionally host letter-writing campaigns to encourage specific religious prisoners. Even if the letter never reaches its intended recipient, authorities will know that these individuals have global support and attention.

- Christian converts from a Muslim background, Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh, experienced this when they were jailed in Iran for evangelizing. A ministry held a letter-writing campaign, and their prison guards were mystified when letters containing Bible verses flooded in.¹⁸
- Many political prisoners testify that international media attention afforded them better treatment in prison because the government knew the world was watching.

Reach Out to Local Refugees

Countless persecuted people worldwide are forced to flee and seek the religious and political freedoms found in other countries. The United States has a significant population of refugees who have sought shelter here, some of them for religious reasons.

Consider volunteering at an organization near you that helps refugees settle into the community. Look for ways to support the poor and vulnerable in your backyard, in addition to around the world.

ADVOCATE WITHIN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Some members of Congress promote international religious freedom because they are passionate about it. However, for members who are less familiar with the topic, calls or emails from constituents can help spur them to action. Your representatives will only know that you care about promoting international religious freedom if you tell them. When elected officials know this issue is important to you and others in your district, it will become important to them, too.

Contact your members of Congress. They work for you, and they have a vested interest in hearing what you have to say. Their offices have staffers dedicated specifically to answering constituent communications. Your call or email will be noticed.

Here are some tips on how to effectively reach out to your legislators:

- **Be as specific as possible:** If you know of a specific bill you would like your representative to support, mention that. If you do not know of a bill on the topic you are interested in, articulate a specific issue, and express your desire to see it addressed.
 - If your representative knows you are concerned about the plight of Coptic Christians in Egypt, Yazidis in Iraq, or Uyghur Muslims in China, they can look out for (or write) future bills that address these issues.
 - For example, if you are concerned about Christians in Nigeria facing terrorist violence, raise that issue specifically and say that you would like to see solutions to strengthen security in the region and encourage the Nigerian government to do more to protect their vulnerable communities.

Contact your members of Congress. They work for you, and they have a vested interest in hearing what you have to say.



- **Engage through advocacy groups:** Advocacy organizations are equipped to inform and advise congressional offices on legislation that will impact religious communities around the world.
 - Engage with and financially support advocacy groups in Washington, D.C. that work on the issues you care about.
 - Family Research Council often sends out “Action Alerts” to inform constituents about how they can engage with their representatives on specific legislative items. With a few clicks, you can send a powerful message to your representatives.
- **Call instead of email:** Many activists recommend calling your representative’s office rather than emailing. It is more personal and impactful to the person taking your call. Prepare before you call with notes about what you would like to say.
- **Schedule a visit:** Your elected officials have local offices, in addition to their office in Washington, D.C., where you can schedule to meet with staffers and discuss the issues you care about
- **When writing, check your grammar:** Poor grammar distracts from your argument and undermines your credibility. Proofreading for errors is well worth your time.
- **Be respectful:** Treating the staffers answering your call or email with kindness will make them happier to help you.

GIVE FINANCIALLY

If you want to make a practical difference in the lives of persecuted Christians, support organizations that serve them. Many great organizations provide resources and financial and legal support to persecuted believers around the world. Give to trusted organizations whose work you want to see continue.

These are a few of the organizations working to aid believers around the world:

- Help the Persecuted¹⁹
- Samaritan's Purse²⁰
- Open Doors²¹

BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU SPEND YOUR MONEY

In addition to funding causes you support, you can also refrain from funding companies that are not doing enough to protect human rights throughout their supply chain. Avoid making purchases from companies that have expressed a lack of concern for grave religious freedom and human rights abuses abroad.

Recently, several large American companies have been found benefitting from the use of forced labor of Uyghur Muslims in China. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute compiled a list of international companies known to utilize Uyghur forced labor in their supply chains, including American companies like Apple and Nike.²²



If you have purchased from these companies, call or write to them to express concern about this issue and ask them to address it. Companies operating in countries known to have poor human rights records must do a better job protecting their customers from being unknowingly complicit in human rights abuses. Informed customers can hold them accountable.

PRAY FOR THE PERSECUTED AND OPPRESSED

Our world often disparages prayer as an impractical means of help and doubts its impact. Such a view is a disservice to the power of prayer and ignores the pleas of persecuted believers around the world who ask others to pray for them.

Your Prayers are Needed

When Pastor Andrew Brunson was held captive in a Turkish prison for his faith, he had a deep desire to know that other people were praying for him and not forgetting him while he was detained. In his darkest moments, Brunson valued the prayers of those around the world. He said, “It was very moving to hear that Chinese and Iranian believers who have suffered so much were praying for me. I felt very unworthy.”²³

Those in hopeless situations may find hope in the knowledge that believers around the world are lifting them up in prayer. For those who are imprisoned, threatened, intimidated, or forced to live in fear, the knowledge that other believers around the world are praying for them can be a comfort.

Being a Christian Compels You to Pray

Scripture calls Christians to remember and pray for the persecuted. In Ephesians 6:18-20, the Apostle Paul instructs believers to “keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”



In this passage, Christians are asked both to pray for all other Christians as well as to pray for Paul, who was imprisoned for his ministry at the time he was writing. In prison, Paul was concerned for his Christian witness and requested prayer that he would have the right words to use. Similarly, we can pray that missionaries and believers in persecuted contexts would represent Christ well with their words and actions and be granted wisdom to operate in their contexts.

Praying is also a significant way to love our neighbor (Mark 12:31). Like Paul, many persecuted Christians express a desire to know that others are praying for them and remember them. American pastor Andrew Brunson felt this way while he was held in a Turkish prison for two years. Consistent prayer is a meaningful way to treat people the way we would want to be treated (Matthew 7:12).



How to Pray for Those Who are Persecuted

- When you know of a specific person abused or imprisoned for their faith, pray for them by name. Consider the cases of Huma Younus, Wang Yi, and Leah Sharibu.
- If you find yourself at a loss for what to pray, simply pray for persecuted believers the way that you would want someone to pray for you if you were in the same situation. When you don't know of individuals in need of prayer, pray for situations.

- Voice of the Martyrs has a convenient Global Prayer Guide with a summary of the challenges in every country with laws targeting Christians and countries where Christians experience dangerous social hostility.²⁴
- Pray for Christians facing blasphemy charges in Pakistan, for young girls held hostage by Boko Haram in Nigeria, for Christians detained in labor camps in North Korea, or churches in China facing harassment from the government.

The following are some prayer points to get you started on your journey of praying for oppressed and persecuted people around the world:

- Pray that God would strengthen persecuted Christians with faith to withstand intense social pressure and violent persecution.
- Pray that God would meet the physical needs of the persecuted, especially those who are marginalized in their society.
- Pray for persecuted believers of other faiths that they would be freed from oppression and their suffering would be alleviated. Pray that God would show them His love in their times of trials.
- Pray that God would raise up leaders who value religious freedom and advocates who can joyfully advance the movement.
- Pray that governments persecuting believers would cease to do so and that religious freedom would become the universal standard across the globe.

GOD HAS WON THE VICTORY, BUT WE MUST FIGHT THE BATTLE

Attacks on the freedom to choose, change, and live out one's faith have always occurred. But the forces of darkness will never succeed at stamping out deeply held convictions.

Former U.S. Ambassador on International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback said of China, "China is at war with faith, but it is a war they will not win."²⁵

This is true of other countries as well. The growth of Christianity in China and Iran bear witness to the failure of these repressive regimes' attempts to crush religious groups. External forces cannot extinguish convictions held in human hearts.

The New Testament recounts how the early church experienced persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen. Acts 8 records the account: "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." Yet, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (NIV). Attempts to destroy Christianity only caused it to grow.

Scripture calls upon Christians to care for the persecuted (Heb. 13:3, Mat. 25:40, 1 Cor. 12:26). Furthermore, in the Christian worldview, religious freedom is owed to all people because persuasion, not coercion, is the means of drawing people to the gospel (Acts 19:8, 28:23; 2 Cor. 5:11).

God does not force people to accept His free gift of salvation. God's gentle approach to humanity affirms the importance of religious freedom for everyone, everywhere. Human dignity demands that all people be treated with respect, not coerced into or away from a religious belief or oppressed for their religious identity.

To "love your neighbor" (Mk. 12:31) is not a commandment strictly limited by geographical borders. God cares for all nations (Mat. 28:19) and instructs His followers to defend the oppressed (Is. 1:17). It is natural for Christians to take up the cause of international religious freedom.

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Let's Review

As discussed, if you want to begin advocating for international religious freedom, there are several first steps you can take.

1. Learn about the various challenges to religious freedom around the world.
2. Share your concern for international religious freedom in the circle of influence you already have.
3. Do your best to reach out to vulnerable people in your community and around the world.
4. Engage with the issue politically and support legislation that can have an impact around the world.
5. Give financially to organizations on the ground supporting persecuted believers.
6. Carefully discern which companies you are supporting when you shop.
7. Submit these concerns to the Lord in prayer.
8. Have confidence that the Lord has already won the victory.

Making a difference will take effort, but we do not know how our small actions might make an impact. A quote often ascribed to Mother Teresa says, "I can do things you cannot do. You can do things I cannot do. Together, we can do great things." So, do what you can. For those that might be aided and encouraged by your actions, it is well worth the effort.





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FRC seeks to inform the news media, the academic community, business leaders, and the general public about family issues that affect the nation from a biblical worldview.

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How can I make a difference?

Religious persecution is a tragic reality around the world. If you've ever wondered what you as an individual can do to help, this resource is for you. It offers several steps you can take to integrate a concern for the persecuted into your daily life and provide aid and encouragement to believers around the globe.



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