

OpenDoors®

FRONTLINE FAITH

**Lessons Of Courageous Christianity
From The Persecuted Church**



A Letter From Mike

Hello,

2020 has been a year of change.

We have seen destruction and chaos like never before; COVID-19, natural disasters, war and famine. This is a year only God saw coming. But at the same time, we have also witnessed the strength and resilience of the Church, even in the midst of extreme hardship.

Holding On To Jesus

Over the last few months, we've seen authorities restrict Christians in Asia from accessing medical treatment and supplies based on their faith.

Across the Middle East, we've seen the enforcement of quarantine laws which have forced Christians back into the homes of those who persecute them, which is often their own family.

In countries like Iran, we've heard stories of Christian doctors and nurses being forced to run COVID-19 clinics with no personal protective equipment as their governments believe that Christians are expendable.

And we've seen extremist groups like the Islamic State use widespread lockdowns as an opportunity to further target vulnerable Christians.

With all that we have seen and experienced this year, it's easy to hold tightly to the hope that next year will be better. But over the years, there is one simple yet powerful lesson I have learnt from the persecuted church: hold on to everything loosely except Jesus.

I wonder, what are you holding on to? Is your faith in Jesus stronger than your hope for a better 2021?

A Unique Opportunity

Even as we face change and the undoing of everyday life as we know it, I believe we have been presented with a unique opportunity.

What we have found, just as the persecuted church has before, is as all the distractions of culture have been stripped back, we're still okay.

In fact, it's at times like these that we discover that when all we have left is Jesus, Jesus really is all that we need.

Isolation and uncertainty have served as an intense focusing tool as they strip back so many of the comforts we experience in life. Even though this season has been an enormous hurdle for many of us, especially for persecuted believers, what if the events of 2020 are actually a hand on the back from the Lord, pushing us into a more beautiful, focused relationship with Him and with one another?

Until Next Year

So, to celebrate the close of the year and to bring joy to each other in the face of this challenging season, we have Gifts of Hope. This is a chance for you to give a meaningful gift to a loved one and thank them for the ways they have carried you through tough times just like this. Not only that, but you will be bringing hope to persecuted Christians all over the world by choosing how you want your gift to be used.

From myself and our team at Open Doors, we pray that the powerful lessons you have learnt through this season have better equipped you for what's ahead, and we pray that your relationship with the Father will be stronger and more intimate than ever into 2021 and beyond.

Thank you for your faithful support.

Until next year,



Mike Gore
CEO Open Doors New Zealand



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Journeying From Darkness To Light

Khalid was born into a Muslim family in Ethiopia. He lived a comfortable life, supported by his loved ones and community.

But then a friend told him about Jesus.

It was this message of the gospel that Khalid couldn't shake. But he knew the choice to follow Jesus wouldn't be an easy one.

Khalid said, "It's very difficult for a Muslim to come to Christ, because in Islam, Jesus is said to be human, and in Christianity, it is said that He is Lord. It was so hard, but God helped me, and I became a free man."

When Khalid chose to be baptised, his new church family welcomed him with open arms. However, his family at home weren't so happy.

"They told me that I defiled the culture and betrayed their faith," he said. "They forced me to leave the house and refused to give me food or shelter. They even threatened to kill me."

Khalid left with few possessions and no way to sustain himself. Like many others in Ethiopia, choosing to follow Jesus nearly cost him his life.

"When I lived with my family, life was comfortable. But when they kicked me out, life turned dark.

"What helped me to stand strong was the Word of God, which says: 'He will never leave or forsake you'. With that in mind, I left everything behind, even if it would make me unhappy.

One Opportunity, Many Blessings

One Sunday church service, Khalid came across a life-changing opportunity. An Open Doors economic empowerment program.

After receiving a microloan and attending saving and investment training, Khalid chose to invest in a small convenience store.

He discovered a gift for entrepreneurship and was soon able to expand his business, rent farmland and employ other members of the community.

With one microloan, Khalid was able to bless his entire community and even began to restore his relationship with his family.

"The loan changed many things in my life," he said. "Now, I provide for my family and even beyond that.

"Those relatives that used to hate me before, now come to spend time with me. Many things have changed."

3 Ways COVID-19 Impacted The Church

For some churches, COVID-19 has brought countless unexpected blessings. But for others, the suffering still lingers. Amidst the pain, uncertainty and even the unforeseen opportunities, this is how COVID-19 is impacting the persecuted church.

1. China | Reminding The Church That The Love Of Jesus Cannot Be Quarantined

Pastor Huang has seen immense change at his church in Wuhan.

“Before the virus, church activities were very normal,” he said. “But after the city was put into lockdown, all activities stopped. During this period, we have realised that we need to be intentionally proactive in loving others through action. For example, we discovered some young guys who work as couriers were not being given food at work. So, for two months, we provided meals for them every day.”

COVID-19 has brought devastation to China. Yet, even in the hardship, the church is uncovering timely reminders as they seek out the Lord. And the greatest of them all:

“The love of Jesus cannot be quarantined.”

2. Yemen | Helping The Church Lean Into Prayer

Today, Yemen is on the brink of collapse. The worst humanitarian crisis in the world has led to 24 million people in desperate need of life-saving aid.

But for Christians, life is even harder. They are often denied emergency relief which is distributed through Islamic organisations and local mosques. Yet, the church is stronger than ever.

“We pray for each other that the Lord delivers us from this pandemic,” Maritza* said. “It has brought us closer to Him and brought us closer together as His children in Yemen.

“We’re trying to spend more time with our children, teaching them and praying together and praying for the salvation of our people.”

3. India | Teaching The Church To Trust In God, Even In Uncertainty

In India, over 120 million people have lost their jobs to COVID-19, leaving countless families dependent on emergency relief.

Yet, even in a pandemic, discrimination in the 10th hardest place to be a Christian never stopped.

“A couple of times there was relief distribution carried out in the village,” said Sita*. “But they refused to help us, leaving us empty-handed.”

Fortunately, with the help of supporters like you, thousands of Christians, including Sita, received the resources they needed.

“This lockdown has given me more time to spend with God. Thank you for the emergency relief. We, as a family, are encouraged and strengthened by Christ’s love.”

*Names changed for security purposes.

The Cost Of Faith

Sop* lived in a small mountain village in Laos.

Growing up, he knew no other belief but Buddhism, which watchful authorities would ensure was followed at all times. It wasn't until he was well into adulthood that Sop discovered Jesus through a Christian radio station.

"I wanted to convert," Sop said. "Then I met a man who invited me to his house and gave me a book: the Bible. I read it and understood it. Then I accepted Jesus into my life. I then began to lead a small group, and we started to gather and worship God."

Soon, Sop's small group was discovered and his cousin, the village chief, confronted him.

"He got so angry at me and punched me many times on my head until I fell on the ground," Sop remembered.

After the brutal beating, Sop's cousin gave him an ultimatum: abandon his faith or be cast out.

Sop chose to leave his home village right away, but not before his community beat him once more and set his home alight.

Opposition Again

In his new village, it wasn't long before Sop's Christian faith was discovered again.

"The village chief kept on telling me, 'You are stupid!' He was very mad. He said, 'We don't want you to convert people and tell people about your religion. Your religion is from the foreigners!'"

But Sop refused to stop sharing the gospel and even began hosting worship gatherings.

"I am always reminded that if people try to kill me for my faith, the Bible says not to be afraid. They can kill my body but not my soul. If they want to kill me, I have no problem with it for I know where I'm going after."

Hope That Cannot Be Shaken

Sop's journey has been full of suffering, isolation and violence. Following Jesus has nearly cost him everything.

But, because of faithful supporters like you, he and his family have been equipped to face this persecution with courageous faith.

"There are times when I feel like the world is against me," Sop shared. "But God sent people. He used Open Doors."

Sop recently joined a church leaders gathering with other persecuted Christians and is learning how to empower the Laotian church to face the future.

His wife has also received literacy training and now teaches believers in their new village.

Even during the pandemic, Sop's family have continued to house believers who have been ostracised. And although COVID-19 is making everyday life increasingly difficult, Sop remains hopeful that God will provide, just as He did before.

*Name changed for security purposes.

Letter Writing Campaign

Encourage Georgine from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

When Georgine waved goodbye to her husband, Dieudonne, one morning in early January, she didn't know it would be the last time.

Dieudonne had gone to their farm to harvest palm nuts where Georgine was expected to join him after cooking for their young children.

"I arrived at the farm only to find his bicycle abandoned along the road," Georgine said. "I called his name, but no one responded."

Dieudonne's body was found days later. At just 30 years of age, extremists had taken his life.

Georgine's children and the many students Dieudonne taught at the local church school are heartbroken, often finding it difficult to hold back their tears after the sudden loss.

Please pray for Georgine and write a letter to encourage her and her family to continue following Jesus, no matter the cost.

"I want to thank Christians who think of me. I am pleased to know that people are praying for me, for God to comfort me and my children."

Please send your letters by 31 December, 2020 to:

**PO Box 51236 Tawa, Wellington, 5249,
New Zealand**

Do:

- Print clearly in English.
- Be brief and encouraging.
- Provide your name and country only.
- Show sensitivity.
- Send greeting cards, artwork and postcards

Do not:

- Mention Open Doors.
- Send money.
- Criticise a country.
- Make proposals to help.

Sixty Second Stories

Short Stories You Can Share

Abigail* – Nigeria

Abigail once lived a pleasant life, raising her one-year-old daughter with her husband on their farm.

But in a day, her life was transformed forever when extremists came searching for Christians.

“We heard a gunshot, but we continued working,” Abigail said. “Then we heard them coming closer.

“My husband said we should run. But when we tried, we saw they were all over.”

Abigail fled to a nearby village, taking refuge there until the next morning.

But her husband, Geoffrey, didn’t manage to escape. The extremists found him, killing him on the spot.

“This is Geoffrey’s clothes and his picture. Whenever I see them, I remember him and the moments we shared.

“He was a caring man. He provided us with food and everything we needed.”

In Abigail’s time of need after Geoffrey’s death, Open Doors supporters like you ensured that she received lifesaving support so she could safely raise her daughter and continue sharing the hope of Jesus in her community.

And despite the long road of recovery ahead, Abigail remains confident that God is still by her side.

“Pray with me, for the situation we are in. Pray that God will help all of us going through a difficult time.”

*Name changed for security purposes.

Daniela – Colombia

Twelve-year-old Daniela was playing near her house when she heard the sound of two gunshots ringing through the streets.

In this region of Colombia, living for Jesus can be extremely dangerous. Organised crime and corruption are common and many areas of ministry, especially drug rehabilitation, are condemned.

So, when Daniela’s father began ministering in the area, criminals killed him as a warning.

Daniela still finds it difficult to recall the memory of her father. It often leads her to tears.

But when asked what her father would have liked her to do in the future, her answer was simple:

“Well, to be a great person and follow the ways of God.”

Daniela was able to spend some time at an Open Doors Children’s Centre in Colombia to meet with other Christian children and receive trauma care.

“I met many children; I went hiking; I put my feet in the river. I also learned that, although there are difficult times in life, there are also times when Jesus helps us to overcome through people and prayer.

“We must be brave and strong and keep trusting in the Lord.”