

GROWING Together

14th Series

CHRISTIANS, AWAKE!

The Suffering Church

Colombia - The Colombian government moves to close down the Mennonite theological seminary. Conflict begins when the Colombian military refuses to exempt the 70 seminary students from military service. The military is upset with students who claim “conscientious objector” status.

China - Bishop Fan Xueyan dies in police custody on April 13, 1992, the day before his ten year sentence would have expired. Bishop Fan had served time in prison and hard labour camps since 1958 for his underground church activities.

Egypt - Mary, a young Egyptian woman, displays her fragile wrist encircled by an ugly bracelet of scarred flesh. She has only recently escaped a nine month captivity at the hands of religious zealots. As part of their program to “convert” Mary from her Christian faith, her captors poured sulphuric acid on her wrist to remove the tattooed cross she wore as a statement of her faith.

Sudan - In a world with more than enough cruelty, Sudan is one of the worst practitioners of religious persecution and violators of human rights. Evidence shows that large segments of the Christian population in the south are being kidnapped and put into slavery by the military regime as a means of political control.

The Comfortable Church

Christianity is not European in origin. We were in Africa before we were in Europe; in India before England; in China before North America. Three quarters of the world’s Christians live outside North America. Because of our wealth and educational advantages, however, we exercise a large influence in the worldwide church. Comfortable as we are with pluralism in cultural and religious matters, many of us find the idea of persecution on the basis of religious belief simply incredible.

Theologically, our attention is diverted by gospels of health and wealth, by fascination with the return of Christ, with “getting along” in society. “Home” takes priority over an issue which seems far too remote from our experience and much too complicated for us to remedy.

Beyond reporting the most sensational stories the media seldom bothers to report religious persecution. Politicians are more concerned with trade and economic issues than pressing a human rights agenda. These factors, taken together, allow the church of the West to safely ignore the plight of Christian brothers and sisters who do not have the luxury of practising their faith freely.

A Way Ahead?

We are a church grounded in the love of a compassionate God. How can we aid our suffering sisters and brothers who are unable to live in freedom and peace?

- We need to foster awareness of what is really happening abroad. By reading Amnesty International’s yearly reports, through correspondence with friends living overseas, and by other means, we can become more aware.
- We can resolve to hold our secular and church leaders accountable on human rights. Through letter writing and conversation we can try to ensure that the issue of religious persecution is part of the dialogue when our elected leaders meet with foreign officials.
- To foster accountability and demonstrate solidarity, congregations here in North America could pair with congregations from an affected country.
- We could urge our churches to sponsor additional refugees from affected regions.

Believing, as we do, that all human beings deserve to live freely and joyously as their Creator intended, we are called to embrace others’ pain and suffering in Christ’s name.

*“I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing ...
I was in prison and you visited me.” (Matthew 25:35c-36)*

GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five monthly Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ’s faithful.



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