

Christian Broadcasting Council

Annual Meeting Feb 25th 2010, House of Lords

Eddie Lyle, CEO, Open Doors, Address

C.B.C, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning.

Yesterday, News International was publically chastised for “obfuscation” - a term used by Doctors accused of using jargon to conceal unpleasant facts from a patient - and acts of collective amnesia by MPs who suspected the organisation of corporately concealing factual evidence.

The accusation stimulated a thread of conscious thought that I want to share with you.

In a recent interview with Premier Christian Radio, Sheikh Dr Muhammad al-Hussaini, Fellow in Islamic Studies at Leo Beck Rabbinical College in north London, blamed the church hierarchy in the UK for not protesting vociferously enough at Christian persecution around the world. Specifically Al-Hussaini mentioned murderous attacks on Christians in Nigeria, the ethnic cleansing of Iraqi Christians being murdered and burned out of their homes and Christians in Pakistan being attacked on the slightest pretext. But he could have continued.

By implication he saw the value of religious liberty in its broadest sense and was also saying that were such atrocities to be visited upon his faith community that there would be a global outcry and a concerted effort to redress the situation.

In the following weeks I underwent several penetrating and challenging press interviews where I was being repeatedly being invited to castigate the Church of which I am a part – and so are persecuted Christians - for its impotence in the face of these atrocities. Yet I could not bring myself – nor would they – to further criticise. But in my heart of hearts, if I am to be ruthlessly honest, I still felt that there is something intrinsically wrong within the consciousness of the Church which seemingly chooses to live in ignorance of the reality of present day persecution. You see I want to be part of the solution, and not part of the problem.

An estimated 100 million Christians around the world are facing persecution on a daily basis.

On 5 March 2009, Iranian Christians, Maryam [27] and Marzieh [30], were arrested without charge by the Iranian authorities. After a month of being held in detention, the women were accused of 'taking part in illegal gatherings' and 'acting against state security'. In an ensuing appearance in court each was warned that they should renounce their Christian faith in both verbal and written form; they repeatedly refused to do this. In a later court appearance, charges of 'anti-state activities', 'propagation of the Christian faith' and 'apostasy' were also filed against them.

Persecuted Christian agencies were shocked and consequently launched an international advocacy campaign calling for their release. Thousands of Christians in the UK wrote letters to the Iranian Ambassador in London seeking their release. For nine months Maryam and Marzieh, , were held in the notorious Evin prison in Tehran where reports of mental and physical abuse are commonplace. Miraculously Maryam and Marzieh are now free after reports of an angelic visitation to their cell and a dramatic climb down by the authorities. When their story was told, the Church responded at an unprecedented level. What I don't understand is why this is not the normative reaction, in the face of such a global pandemic of persecution of Christians.

EMPHASIS - We interviewed, Martha another young women from Iran who was forced to flee her country of birth to seek safety. Forced from her family, her home and profession, and threatened with rape by the authorities Martha said, “I hate myself” and asked “Why did God create me a girl?” We asked her to describe her life now in the UK, and she said, “Life is very beautiful, but not more beautiful than Jesus. I'm safe, nobody looks at me, nobody points at me. I have a good feeling when I go to church. I never had this in my own country [Iran]”.

Iran is ranked second on the list of nations Open Doors monitors for its annual report of the 50 worst perpetrators of persecution against Christians.

DISPLAY TRAINERS - These trainers belonged to Ramesh Chandra Nayak, a pastor in Orissa. He was wearing them on the day in August 2008 when Hindu extremists arrived at his front door. His church building was destroyed. They set fire to his house. His father was attacked and stabbed to death and his grandmother was burned alive.

Open Doors supported Ramesh in his despair. Thousands more have received food, medical help, counseling, legal support, practical help and encouragement, as a result of the sacrificial donations of Christians from around the world. In total the Orissa uprising resulted in 50,000 Christians being displaced, more than 4,000 homes destroyed and the murder of 120 Christians.

300 villages and at least 250 churches were destroyed. Eighteen months on, thousands of people are still living in refugee camps unable to return to their villages out of fear or the threat of being forced to convert to Hinduism.

One would think it is safe to assume that in the world's largest democracy justice would prevail. However the experience of Christians in Orissa suggest something different as countless Hindu radicals are acquitted of charges of violence against Christians in the 2008 uprising. Despite this hard line Hinduism continues to grow. In 2009, there were reports of 152 violent attacks. Eight Indian states have implemented anti conversion legislation and the Christian community is under increasing pressure to scale down their faith.

Why should this matter to us here in the UK? Why should we care about what happens to people who live 10,000 miles away? 1 Corinthians tells us that "when one member suffers, all members suffer with it. Whether you are an eye, an arm or an elbow, and they are an ear, a foot or a kneecap, we are all part of one body and the biblical command is to "not forget those who are suffering, but imagine that you are there with them". Inactivity or ambivalence is not an option.

[Picture 2] Brother Chala, is a 63-year-old subsistence farmer and single parent to three children. One evening, fifteen months ago he left his son Giduma (7) and daughter Chaltu (12) sleeping while he took his older son Elias (13) to help him protect his harvest from wild animals. During the night, Chala's house caught fire. Giduma and Chaltu were trapped inside and unable to escape the flames. There have been previous instances of persecution in the village and church leaders suspect that this incident is part of an ongoing attack against Christians in the area. Chala is known to be the only Christian in his community and is used to threats from hostile neighbours. His house was set ablaze in very similar circumstances in 2006. No one was held responsible for that incident either. Chala and his son are the only Christians in a Muslim dominated village. They feel very isolated and are greatly in need of support and encouragement.

The persecuted church and individual believers are a forgotten people; marginalised and abused, discriminated against and ostracised. We can believe in the instruction to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God, but what does this mean in practice?

On 1st April, Maundy Thursday, under the unseeing gaze of the statues commemorating the Christian martyrs of the last century, a wreath will be laid in memory of the Christian martyrs of the 2009. Next to the wreath will be placed a book carrying the names and stories of the men and women who gave their lives as a result of their commitment to Christ; those for whom faith costs the most.

On their own, millions of Christians have little chance of influencing the political process but together they can make a difference, in fact we can make a difference and protest as vociferously as our Englishness will allow. We are asking Christians in UK to "use your signature to get their signature" and ask their MP to sign an Early Day Motion aimed at putting persecuted Christians on the political agenda. We are asking the normally silent minority to become a very noisy one. In the opening days of the campaign 736 individuals have contacted their MP and 15 have already signed the EDM, urging the government to do everything in its power to raise and pursue concerns about human rights and religious liberty in countries overseas.

In my heart of hearts I do not believe that the church is guilty of obfuscation, perhaps we have become overwhelmed by the needs of the world, but after 10 years preaching the length and breadth of the UK & Ireland, I am continuously confronted with literally thousands of Christians who say we simply did not know. Perhaps today's symposium will precipitate a seed change in getting the persecuted church onto the agenda of every church in our nation.

Perhaps I could leave the last word to one of those whose Martyrdom is remembered at Westminster Cathedral.

The essence of **optimism** is that it takes **NO ACCOUNT** of the present, but it is a source of **inspiration**, of **vitality** and **hope** where others have resigned; it enables a man to **hold his head high**, to claim the future for himself and not to abandon it to his enemy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Thank you for listening.