

GENERAL SYNOD**Background Paper: The Persecuted Church in the World****Summary**

1. Although it is hard to fathom the full extent of religious freedom violations, no one denies that violations are happening or that Christians are being targeted because of their faith. The Church of England's network of Companion Links provides a means by which these violations can be surfaced and engaged with. The forthcoming Lambeth Conference provides a window of opportunity to strengthen these relationships and to cast a spotlight, where appropriate, more squarely on violations of freedom of religion or belief around the Communion.

Understanding the Challenge

2. In the field of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), 'persecution' is an unfortunately nebulous and generic term that is highly evocative but hard to define. It recalls the violent and cruel atrocities committed by terrorist organisations and non-state actors such as Boko Haram in Nigeria or Islamic State in Iraq. It brings to mind the repression of Bahais in Iran or the ethnic cleansing of Uyghurs in China as well as notorious blasphemy cases such as that of Asia Bibi in Pakistan. But such publicly reported cases are sadly only the proverbial tip of an iceberg the size of which remains unknown. For most individuals who face 'persecution' because of their faith the reality is much more mundane and commonplace and yet their story remains unheard.
3. FoRB violations take place in most spheres of society – in court rooms and prisons, in tax offices or immigration centres, in hospitals and health clinics, in the workplace or at school, in neighbourhoods controlled by vigilante groups and sometimes even in the family. Violations occur through formal sanctions, various types of administrative harassment, discriminatory immigration and naturalisations stipulations, unreasonable obstacles to the labour or housing markets, anti-minority stereotypes promoted within the official school curricula, stigmatising media report, acts of vandalism and intimidation, and countless other manifestations of prejudice, discrimination and hostility.
4. It is difficult, if not impossible, to measure the estimated scale of this problem. How does one measure discrimination in the labour market or the impact of low-level bureaucratic harassment on religious communities and their members? The more complex the understanding of FoRB the harder it becomes to supply reliable figures. In an age where the media and the public clamour for simple answers and quotable rankings such complexity is not always convenient.
5. In response, bodies like the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life have tried to focus on the potential rather than actual violations of religious freedom by

GENERAL SYNOD

estimating the number of people who live in countries with high or very high levels of religious restrictions and societal hostility. In 2012 they reported that 83% of the global population live in countries where the free practice of faith is restricted.¹ Little has changed in the subsequent years with Pew reporting in November 2020 that government restrictions on religion reached the highest level globally in more than a decade.² Whether such figures capture the reality and contribute to an adequate understanding of the presenting issues is open to question.

6. Despite these problems most analysts agree that the world is an increasingly hostile place for FoRB. It is also clear that Christian communities have suffered in many parts of the world. Despite the evident methodological challenges, one organisation, Open Doors, provides an annual ranking of countries where Christians suffer persecution. In its 2021 report it concluded that 340 million Christians around the world face persecution with one in six Christians in Africa facing persecution, one in 5 Christians facing persecution in Asia and one in twelve facing persecution in Latin America.³ Its 2022 Report will be published before the February General Synod and will be available on-line.
7. It is also evident that not all Churches are equally affected with Evangelicals in several countries attracting most hostility since people suspect them of engaging in unwelcome missionary activities and representing the West, especially the USA. In some countries like Nepal and India there has been a move to introduce anti-conversion legislation, while in the Russian Federation many of the Protestant and Evangelical churches, especially those with a short history in the country, bear the stigma of 'foreign sect'.

Responding to the Challenge

8. At its debate on freedom of religion or belief in 2021 the General Synod affirmed that the Church's understanding of human dignity is such that it is concerned whenever and wherever the right to freedom of religion or belief is infringed. It held that *everyone everywhere* is made in the image in the God and that that governments should prioritise the most serious violations of FoRB rather than any specific community.⁴
9. The suffering of Christians worldwide is one of deep, heartfelt and immediate concern to the Church, but such concern does not overshadow or take precedence over other FoRB violations. It may often be the case, however, that the Church has a stronger locus to address the religious freedom

¹ Pew Research Centre, 2012. <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>.

² <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/11/10/in-2018-government-restrictions-on-religion-reach-highest-level-globally-in-more-than-a-decade/>

³ <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>

⁴ <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/news-releases/bishop-tells-general-synod-speak-out-against-persecution-religious>

GENERAL SYNOD

violations of Christians, even though it rightly supports and advocates this right for all people.

10. As set out in the MPA Report to General Synod in 2021, the Church of England's Companion Links are a valuable tool in the Church's ability to engage in this area.⁵ All Church of England diocese have links with churches in the Anglican Communion as well as ecumenical links with churches in Europe. At the last count there are some 87 such links including: 38 with Africa (East Africa -15, Southern Africa -10, West Africa – 5, Central Africa – 6, North Africa - 2); 25 with Europe; 11 with India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; 3 with Latin America; 2 with Central America and the Caribbean; 4 with the USA and Canada, 2 with the Middle East; 2 with the Far East, 2 with the Pacific and 1 with Australia.⁶
11. These link relationships are expressed broadly through visits and exchanges, prayer, gift giving and financial support. Visits and exchanges can be between Bishops, clergy and laity, young people and parishes. Prayer and worship form a foundation for all link relationships They can be celebrated as instruments for God's mission in the world.
12. In the field of FoRB, the links provide the opportunity for cross-cultural learning and to develop a deeper knowledge as to what it means to be Church outside of England including the conditions facing Christians around the world in their every-day lives. This provides a more detailed and nuanced picture which isn't easily captured by the rather blunt headline figures produced by media and agencies. Such engagement can in turn inform diocese in their understanding of how they can provide support through, prayer, giving and advocacy.
13. Based on relationships established and knowledge learnt, bishops regularly raise matters of importance with relevant Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) ministers, as well as with officials both in Whitehall and in-country. In January 2019, the Bishop of Leeds, following an earlier companion link visit to Sudan, engaged in a roundtable event on FoRB organised by the British Embassy in Khartoum. Efforts such as these can contribute to positive change as illustrated by the government of Sudan's decision in July 2020 to abolish the crime of apostasy.⁷
14. At a time when the Government is to review the implementation of the recommendations in the Bishop of Truro Report into FCDO support for persecuted Christians, the insights from links could be particularly helpful as they underscore the reality of the situation in many different countries and

⁵<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/202104/GS%202197%20Freedom%20of%20Religion%20or%20Belief.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/world-mission/diocesan-links>

⁷ <https://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article69578>

GENERAL SYNOD

regions. Similarly, diocese can look to their links to convene conversations regarding FoRB that could feed into and support the Ministerial on Freedom of Religion or Belief that the Government is hosting in London in July 2022.

15. Although the Church of England is not responsible for organising the Lambeth Conference or for determining its agenda, the Conference provides an opportunity for the Church of England to engage with the Church globally and to renew the bonds of fellowship that binds us together as a Communion. It is anticipated that the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for International Religious Freedom will attend the Conference and meet with bishops from countries of particular concern.