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INTERPRETING THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD
FROM A LUTHERAN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE
JUNE/JULY 2014
**Persecution: Good for the Church**

Not long after Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes were burned at the stake in Brussels on July 1, 1523, the news came to Luther. It disturbed him greatly that these two young men, monks of his Augustinian order who had confessed the Gospel of free forgiveness, were the first to die. Luther, after all, was responsible for the uproar. Why had the Lord not taken him?

Deeply moved, the incident loosed his pen, and he wrote his first hymn: “A New Song Shall Here Be Begun.” It’s never made it into our hymnals because it is a type of ballad that the town minstrels would use, long before there were such things as newspapers, to take the latest news from town to town in sung form.

The 20th century was the bloodiest in Christian history with the death of tens of millions at the hands of Communist regimes. Now, we are continuously shocked by Islamic radicals persecuting and killing Christians daily in the Middle East and Africa. Meanwhile, our consciences vacillate as we sense the cultural shift in the U.S. that has produced an increasing avalanche of harassment and is likely to get much worse.

I was in Ethiopia a few months back. In 1979, the leader of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (now approaching seven million Lutherans) was murdered by the Communist government. I chatted at lunch with the current president and general secretary of the church. The topic of persecution came up. Mind you, each of these men had themselves been repeatedly jailed in the Communist period for their confession of Christ. I cannot begin to imagine the horror of an Ethiopian prison. President Wakseyoum Idosa leaned toward me across the table, raised his index finger, and said with all gravity, “Persecution is always good for the Church. Always.”

Since Luther’s hymn of martyrs is so unknown, I offer it to you as a hymnic/devotional prelude as you consume this issue of the *Witness*. I bid you pray for the modern martyrs soon to face death in Nigeria and elsewhere today. I bid you consider that your own “light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). From Calvary itself, we know that God works the very greatest things through suffering and martyrdom—a “new song,” indeed.
This special issue of The Lutheran Witness is 40 pages, eight longer than usual, and jam-packed with information on a topic we don’t discuss much: persecution.

Why take the extra time and space to discuss this “mark of the Church,” this suffering that Christian brothers and sisters endure for the sake of Christ and His gifts of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper? Because His promises are true, His grace sufficient, even in the midst of torture, death, job loss, government imprisonment.

Hear now, in his own words, excerpts from an LCMS pastor, currently teaching in Nigeria, who outlines what some Christians are enduring, all while confessing the Gospel in all its truth, in all its purity.

As the Church catholic is celebrating the resurrection of our Lord and His immi-
nent victory over sin, death and the devil, we, in the Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically Nigeria, are having a different experience altogether. Our celebration is done with mixed feelings as an Islamic sect called ‘Boko Haram’ has vowed to utterly eliminate every element of Christianity in the country.

Below is a synopsis of Boko Haram attacks on Christians in the last few weeks:

1) On the 24th of March, 35 people were killed and many others seriously injured when an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded in Ngarosoye Market Square, a Christian-dominated market, in Borno State.

2) On the same day (24th of March), at least 20 seminarians were slaughtered at the Catholic Junior Seminary in Adamawa State, while many others escaped with serious injuries. This attack was carried out at night—about 2:00 a.m., after the celebration of the Annunciation of our Lord by the true Church, according to the Premium Time Newspaper of March 25.

3) On the 29th of March, at least 47 high school students were slaughtered at night at the Government Secondary School, Maiduguri. The students killed were all Christians who were selected from their Muslim counterparts, as each student was asked to confess their faith either as a Christian or Muslim. (This is similar to the Decius persecution of the Roman Empire and that of the Old Ghana Empire—in AD 1076—when the Almoravids, another Islamic sect, wiped out non-Muslims in the northwest African region.)

4) April 1, five police officers were killed in a bomb blast at the police station that consisted primarily of Christian officers, including the head officer.

5) On the 12th of April, two hundred candidates for JAMB (a pre-university entrance examination similar to the SAT examination in the United States) were killed in one center since it is primarily, if not only, Christians who prepare to attend college/university in that area.

Despite these attacks and tragedies, we believe that our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ has conquered it all. Hence we join the Church catholic to proclaim that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

It has never been easier...
I Do!

Do you remember the day you stood before the Lord’s altar, giving public confession of the Christian faith? What a glorious day as you confessed openly before all those present, those seen and unseen, including Jesus and all His angels! You received cards and gifts. What a delight! You were ready to take on the world . . . and even your own death!

You confessed, “I do, by the grace of God” in response to the pastor’s question: “Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?” That is heady stuff! Or is it? Perhaps it’s no big deal.

Well, beware! Another knows, and his name is the devil. According to St. John’s account in Revelation, he has his operation of unbelief in the world! He knows it, and now he seeks to turn you toward culture or an unfair boss. The devil seeks to burden your conscience, not something out there, such as a decay- ing culture or an unfair boss. The devil seeks to turn you toward his spawned children of God. He seeks to master your soul, that is, to extinguish faith from the heart and your words of His saving death from others’ ears. He seeks to turn you toward pride and self-confidence or into sadness or despair. He’s knows every angle; he’s had practice. He tried it on Adam and succeeded, but with Jesus, your Champion, he had no chance. How is it with you?

Since your public confession of Christ is recent, the devil thinks he has an easy target. “So you say you’ll even die for your Jesus; well, let’s put you to the test!” And mysteriously, God may agree, as He did with Job (Job 1:8). Even here, you own a Spirit given, childlike confidence. “Though He [God] slay me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15). Let this be further encouragement. Jesus makes a fool of the devil by tricking the trickster, having his evil designs work for God’s glory. In this way, Jesus brings you closer to Him, as you are driven to your merciful Master.

Here’s the bottom line: The real cosmic battleground is your conscience, not something out there, such as a decaying culture or an unfair boss. The devil seeks to burden your conscience; God seeks to clean and wash your blood-stained conscience (given through the means of grace) as the greatest threat to the devil and his mission operation of unbelief in the world: He knows it, and now so do you.

Others before you have not only believed boldly but even died for confessing Christ. In the middle of the second century, Polycarp, bishop of ancient Smyrna (modern-day city of Izmir in western Turkey), refused to be nailed to the wood but readily submitted to the fire. Here is his confession before his death: “Eighty-six years have I have served the Lord; and now I am going to my Lord.” Polycarp declared, “And He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme My king and my Savior?”

Such an emboldened confession is created by the only true God, who owned Polycarp. What God wills, God sees through! Be comforted. You don’t plan your death or even your public witness; God does, even as He plans your life.

The devil is out after the baptizedly blood-stained children of God. He seeks to master your soul, that is, to extinguish faith from the heart and your words of His saving death from others’ ears. He seeks to turn you toward pride and self-confidence or into sadness or despair. He’s known every angle; he’s had practice. He tried it on Adam and succeeded, but with Jesus, your Champion, he had no chance. How is it with you?

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You promised to suffer death on behalf of Christ on your confirmation day. Did you mean it? by RANDALL GOLTER

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The devil is out after the baptizedly blood-stained children of God.
History proves the Church will always suffer for Christ's sake. How can we pray that the Lord will keep us faithful too?

By Albert B. Collver III

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted" (Matt. 5:10). He warned His disciples that they would be persecuted for His name's sake (Matt. 5:11-12). The prophets of old were persecuted (Matt. 5:11-12). The prophet Isaiah, who so beautifully proclaimed the birth of Christ, was slain in half according to the tradition of the Church. John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet, was beheaded by King Herod (Matt. 14:1-12). Persecution at its core is suffering inflicted by the unrighteous upon the righteous. Ultimately, Satan and his evil hosts are the source of persecution in the Church. As a result, persecution will remain until the final judgment, when Christ returns and casts the devil and his servants into the lake of fire forever (Rev. 20:10-14).

Abel was first. Then Lot suffered at the hands of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah for being righteous (Gen. 14:12-14). The Egyptians persecuted the Israelites (Ex. 1:8-11). The Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans and others who followed were also persecutors (Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans). In the New Testament Church, Stephen became the first martyr recorded in the Scriptures (Acts 7:54-60). Persecution involves suffering to the righteous in Israel at the hands of various conquerors and during the various captivities (Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans). In the New Testament Church, Stephen became the first martyr recorded in the Scriptures (Acts 7:54-60). The Egyptians persecuted the Israelites (Ex. 1:8-11). The Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans were also persecutors (Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans).

Persecution involves suffering for the faith, suffering for the name of Jesus. Persecution may lead to death. According to tradition, every apostle save St. John, who died in exile on the island of Patmos, suffered as a martyr for Christ. Others suffered less than death but are hated by the world. Persecution takes many forms: ridicule, lost opportunities at work, imprisonment, physical suffering, torture and so forth. Innumerable cruelties were and are done to Christians because they confessed Christ.

Sheer numbers

In the opening pages of Lutheran Service Book (pages vi-xiii), a few of those who suffered for the name of Jesus from the first nineteen centuries of the Church are listed, beginning with Stephen the martyr, the apostles, the disciples of the apostles and others in the pre-Constantine era before Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire. The first three centuries of the Church mark her time of pagan persecution—the time from the apostles to the Diocletian persecution (AD 303-311). Under Diocletian, Christian churches were destroyed, Bibles burned, Christians were deprived of their livelihood, their civil rights and ultimately executed unless they would sacrifice to the gods. Diocletian instituted one of the most intense periods of persecution, one that has been remembered to the present day.

Although many Christians were persecuted and murdered during this time, in terms of sheer numbers, more Christians suffered martyrdom in the twentieth century (estimated at 70-100 million) than all the martyrs of the previous nineteen centuries combined (estimated at approximately 30 million). The Communists alone created more Christian martyrs than the previous centuries. Beyond the sheer number of martyrs is the anonymity of them. Previously, the Church remembered the martyrs as the cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1). The twentieth century marked the time when the number of martyrs and the way in which they vanished all but wiped them from the history of the Church. This is one of the reasons our present reality of martyrdom in the Church is so limited. The anonymity of the martyrs is one of the ways in which Satan and his evil hosts try to decimate the memory, the testimony and the witness of Christ from the world.

Dr. Martin Luther identified the cross, that is, suffering, persecution and martyrdom, as a mark of the Church. By this he meant that wherever the Church of Christ is located, there will be persecution and martyrdom. Luther writes, “The only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God’s word, enduring this for the sake of Christ. . . . Wherever you see or hear this, you may know that the holy Christian church is there” (Martin Luther, “On the Councils of the Church,” 1539, American Edition 41, pp. 164-165).

The Lord tells us that suffering and persecution are necessary until His glorious return, for wherever Christ is confessed, the devil and his servants will resist, attack and attempt to destroy the Church. Yet our Lord Jesus also promises to work these sufferings as a blessing both for the individual who suffers and for the Church. In Romans 8, the Lord promises to work all for good. He promises that persecution and suffering conform us into His image and cannot separate us from His love.

The Lord’s faithful

The twenty-first century demonstrates that the persecution and martyrdom of the Lord’s faithful continues. Such suffering may even come to us. As the Church of God, we are called to be faithful and to confess the name of Jesus no matter the cost. We should give thanks for the martyrs and confessors of the faith, whom the Lord preserved during their time of trial. We should pray for those persecuted in the Church today. Although we may not know them, we can be certain that many are suffering and dying for the sake of Christ. We pray that the Lord keep us faithful. Come, Lord Jesus, come!
MARTYRS FOR THE FAITH

by KATIE SCHUERMANN

Martyr, or marturos in Greek, literally means ‘witness,’ and since Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden of Eden, men and women have faithfully born witness to the world of their hope in God’s mercy and promise of redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some of these martyrs have even witnessed to the point of death.

The Great Martyrdom of Nagasaki (1622)
Time Period: Baroque Period
Faithful Witness: Over 100 priests, laymen, women and children in Japan were put to death for their Christian faith in 1622; when hearing they were to be executed for their faith, rejoiced for being able to die for Christ; some priests kissed the stakes to which they were to be tied and burned.
Accused of: The shogunate and imperial government of Japan grew leery of Christian colonization and, fearing loss of power and control, banned Christianity; Christian teachers were ordered to leave the country.
Martyrdom: Most were burned at the stake or beheaded.

Abel
Time Period: Old Testament
Faithful Witness: Brought a thank offering of the firstborn of his flock of sheep to the Lord. God favored his sacrifice because it was given in true faith.
Accused of: Cain, his older brother, was jealous of Abel’s favor before God.
Martyrdom: Cain rose up against his younger brother and killed him.

Heinrich Voes (d. 1523) and Johann Esch (d. 1523)
Time Period: Reformation
Faithful Witness: Augustinian monks at Antwerp, Belgium; followers of Martin Luther; considered first Lutheran martyrs; commemorated by Luther in the hymn “Ein neues Lied wir heben an.”
Accused of: Due to anti-Lutheran sentiment from the Roman Catholic Church, imprisoned for evangelizing the Lutheran faith; tried by the Inquisition (Roman Catholic tribunal).
Martyrdom: Burned at stake in Brussels.

Henry Lyman and Samuel Munson (d. 1834)
Time Period: Nineteenth Century
Faithful Witness: In 1834, sent out by the Boston Mission Society to Batakland (Sumatra) in Indonesia to evangelize the indigenous, cannibalistic people; laid the groundwork for the indigenous, cannibalistic people; laid the groundwork for the Lutheran faith; tried by the Inquisition (Roman Catholic tribunal).
Martyrdom: Murdered and eaten in a cannibal feast.

Perpetua and Felicitas (d. 203)
Time Period: Early Church (Third Century)
Faithful Witness: Perpetua, a young lady of noble birth, and Felicitas, a slave girl, were both catechumens in the North African city of Carthage. Imprisoned by Roman imperialists for their Christian faith; Perpetua remained steadfast in her confession throughout her imprisonment, despite frequent pleas from her own father to apostatize; both faithfully carried out their vocations as mothers while in prison; Perpetua breastfed her child in prison, and Felicitas gave birth to her baby in prison two days before her execution.
Accused of: Being Christians; imperial subjects of Septimus Severus (193–211) were forbidden to become Christians.
Martyrdom: Execution took place in the public arena as part of the birthday festival for Emperor Geta; first scourged, then set upon by a wild heifer, then dispatched with a sword.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)
Time Period: Twentieth Century
Faithful Witness: German Lutheran theologian, writer and pastor; international reception of his writings has greatly influenced modern Christendom.
Accused of: Participated in the Protestant resistance movement against Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party; led to his imprisonment in 1943.
Martyrdom: Executed by hanging at Flossenbürg concentration camp in the closing months of World War II.

Gudina Tumsa (1929–1979)
Time Period: Twentieth Century
Faithful Witness: General Secretary of the [Lutheran] Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.
Accused of: Criticized the revolutionary Marxist-Leninist government; imprisoned twice for his church leadership.
Martyrdom: Kidnapped from a street and killed by Communist regime.

Stephen traditionally regarded as the first Christian martyr
Time Period: New Testament
Faithful Witness: One of seven deacons appointed by the apostles to care specifically for widows and the poor in the Church; wise and of good repute, speaking with the Spirit and doing great wonders and signs among the people; boldly confessed before the assembly that he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
Accused of: Members of the synagogues wrongfully accused him of blasphemy.
Martyrdom: Stoned to death; Saul of Tarsus (apostle Paul) witnessed his stoning.

Faithful Witness:
Over 100
Time Period:
Nineteenth Century
Martyrdom:
Burned at stake in Brussels.

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Accused of:
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Martyrdom:
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Twentieth Century
Faithful Witness:
German Lutheran theologian, writer and pastor; international reception of his writings has greatly influenced modern Christendom.
Accused of:
Participated in the Protestant resistance movement against Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party; led to his imprisonment in 1943.
Martyrdom:
Executed by hanging at Flossenbürg concentration camp in the closing months of World War II.

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Time Period:
Twentieth Century
Faithful Witness:
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Accused of:
Criticized the revolutionary Marxist-Leninist government; imprisoned twice for his church leadership.
Martyrdom:
Kidnapped from a street and killed by Communist regime.

Stephen:
Time Period:
New Testament
Faithful Witness:
One of seven deacons appointed by the apostles to care specifically for widows and the poor in the Church; wise and of good repute, speaking with the Spirit and doing great wonders and signs among the people; boldly confessed before the assembly that he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
Accused of:
Members of the synagogues wrongfully accused him of blasphemy.
Martyrdom:
Stoned to death; Saul of Tarsus (apostle Paul) witnessed his stoning.

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Martyrdom:
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As Western society rapidly reverts to non-Christian moral values, it becomes more important to study the rich experience of the Church with respect to persecution and martyrdom. It is a matter of life and death.

As children of Adam, we tend to be hedonists. We want to be immersed in comfort and pleasure. While it is true that God created people to bestow His good gifts on them, by turning away from God through the lie of the serpent, people attempted to find an alternative source of pleasure, which was destined to fail. All people found was death; there is not and may never be life apart from the One who is the Giver of life.

That is why we should not be surprised when our thinking of Christian life gets distorted in many ways. Christ said He came so that people “may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10), and we are tempted to understand it in terms of possessions in this life. St. Paul said: “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13), and we find delight in thinking that we must be successful in this life, for our God is strong and powerful. Alas, by our nature, we do not want to recognize that the Lord’s “power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

The Christian message, however, and the God in whom we believe run contrary to our human aspirations of the old Adam. The scandal of Christianity is found in its insistence on exclusivity. There is only one truth, only one way to salvation. By default, all other religions are misleading and pave the way to hell. That makes Christians not “friendly” in the eyes of the world, and so it may cause some to compromise in matters of faith with the hope that it will result in more peace and stability in society. That is not likely to happen.

The perception of being part of a “Christian society,” once fairly common, is quickly disappearing. As Western society rapidly reverts to non-Christian moral values, it becomes more important to study the rich experience of the Church with respect to persecution and martyrdom. The main lesson we can learn from it is this: This is extremely serious. It is a matter of life and death. And shallow Christianity that is individualistic and psychologically-oriented is absolutely doomed in that epoch.

Christians suffer because Christ suffered

Christians may seem increasingly small and miserable in this world. We should not be surprised. After all, our Lord looked miserable on the cross, and it only with the eyes of faith that we can see Him there for what He is: almighty Lord and King.

It is important to realize that our sufferings caused by persecution are not incidental to our faith. If it were so, then the cross of Christ would also be incidental, just one of the steps in the “salvation plan” to get over and forget about.

So, you are a Christian? Congratulations! You belong to the faith where you are expected to suffer in this life. Christian sufferings are inherently Christological, and in that they reflect the nature of God as He truly is.

The cross is widely recognized as the major symbol of Christian faith. In its original context, there was nothing noble about it: It served as a frightening reminder of the shameful execution reserved for the worst of criminals and enemies of the state. There is something profound about it being a special sign with which we as Christians have been marked at our Baptism. It does mark the shape of our Christian life. What is it? “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). All. No exceptions. Persecution for the faith is not something that should catch any baptized off guard; it is inherent in the very nature of Christian faith.

When we think of persecution of Christians and public confession of faith in such circumstances lead
ing to martyrdom, we tend to think about some cruel events happening in modern countries in Africa and Asia. Glorious first centuries of the Church also come to mind: the third or early fourth-century Roman arena, the crowds shouting "Christians to the lions", heroic men and women that would rather incur unspeakable suffering for the "faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) than offer incense to the genius of the Caesar.

Indeed, both in ancient and in recent times, Christian faith and its adherents experienced massive onslaughts. But does it involve, on any personal level, modern Christian inhabitants of the West, particularly those living in North America? One may argue that this is already the case, while numerous trends point at even greater pressure to be applied to Christians in the future.

Methods of persecution: not necessarily wild animals

We do not have lions physically roaming around us, and it will likely not get to that point in our lifetime. Major cataclysms may or may not get to that point in our lifetime. As Christians, we continuously roam around us, and it will likely not necessarily wild animals Christians in the future. May argue that this is already the case, while numerous trends point at even greater pressure to be applied to Christians in the future.

SO, YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN? CONGRATULATIONS! YOU BELONG TO THE FAITH WHERE YOU ARE EXPECTED TO SUFFER IN THIS LIFE.

A typical example can be observed in gradual rise of hostile public attitude to Christian faith. At first, it may be reflected in a sentiment that Christians are simply inferior in general in their education and knowledge to those not accepting Christian claims. After all, "Today, nobody believes in the Bible anymore." "You must be ashamed to be a Christian." "What are you—a stupid?!"

When our relatives and friends take such positions, it is especially hard, although Christians should not be surprised if they are hated for Christ's name's sake (Matt. 10:22).

Then this negative view of Christianity will translate into legislation making life harder for Christians. For example, it may be more strict taxation policy and infringement on personal rights. It is worth remembering that part of the takeover of the Lutheran church buildings and other property by the Communists in Russia of 80 years ago was not through direct prohibitions, but rather through pecuniary taxes, strict control by the fire department and city authorities, as well as mounting pressure on people who attended churches so that eventually many people stopped coming to the churches. Those who continued to do so could not afford taking care of the church buildings anymore.

Finally, covert persecution may come through changing the educational model, which will seek to plant the seeds of discord within families by placing children into a new milieu culturally foreign to Christianity.

Be firm in time of crisis

Do not think that by doing nothing and just keeping quiet you will stay out of trouble. True, you may win some time for yourself. But sooner or later, you will face the consequences of your spiritual slumber. At the same time, there is nothing you can 'do' about persecution, strictly speaking. If it happens, it happens. To be sure, we must be active citizens and raise our voices on the public square to defend traditional Christian values and attitudes, but we must not be over-confident that simply by political lobbying for Christianity we will surely be able to avoid persecution.

If a real battle is to come, make sure you enter it with proper training and ammunition. Persecutions often come when you expect them the least. Be on guard!
What do you do when persecution strikes?

1. The devil is behind all and every persecution. Accordingly, our fight is not with flesh and blood, it must be thought of in spiritual categories. “LORD, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO? YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE” (John 6:68). Abide with the Lord and His gifts by all means possible. Come to church where His gifts are administered.

2. When a non-Christian government targets the Church for an attack, it may (among other things) attempt to infiltrate the Church to bring another gospel and so change a church body from inside. Have your ears open to hear the true voice of your Shepherd. Be nurtured in Scripture and the confessions of the Church so that you may “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1).

3. Make sure you know at least some Scripture verses by heart. It will help you pray and find consolation if you are left alone and have no Bible around.

4. Pray. Christ hated sin, but He loved sinners. At the time of death, He prayed for His executors (Luke 23:34), and the first Christian martyr, Stephen, did likewise (Acts 7:60).

5. Do not trust the promises and reassurances of people who are enemies of the faith. Satan is the cause of persecution, and Satan is a liar. We should do our best to show our non-believing neighbors that Christians are loving and kind, but it would not hurt remembering that Christians will never come out right in the eyes of the world anyway.

6. Think about relocation. I do hope that it will never become such a situation in the United States that Christians will have to move to preserve their faith, but we must never exclude any possibilities. Be flexible. It is better to be in a place where you have freedom of worship even when it results in deterioration of your social status and economic prosperity.

God will wipe away all tears

Christ is the triumphant Victor. He triumphs on His cross, in His shedding of blood, in His death. As Christ has risen and conquered death, so He will raise our bodies too and give them immortality, no matter what will happen to them in this life. The Christian life is rather a marathon than a sprint. What matters is getting to the end, which is also the new beginning. “BE FAITHFUL UNTIL DEATH, AND I WILL GIVE YOU THE CROWN OF LIFE” (Rev. 2:10).

Instruct your children at the earliest time possible before the world grabs them through increasingly sophisticated ways of mind control.

Christian education must be done within families. You can’t just expect the pastor to do everything for you. Regular church attendance, reading of Scripture, singing hymns, praying, doing works of mercy are always good.

Educate your children

If you prefer school, sports, and other activities (which may be perfectly fine in and by themselves) over what is Christian—the Church service, Divine Liturgy, Lord’s Supper—then you have lost your battle already. Do not expect that if the real trouble comes, you would be firm to endure.

Paying Special Attention

You likely have a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) ministry or two you wish to support in any way you can.

Consider paying special attention to them with a gift that is easy to share: the interest from your Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) investments. You can contribute your investment interest directly to the ministry of your choice for a specific period of time or for as long as you are invested.

Just as LCEF embraces the LCMS, you can embrace the ministry of your choice. Tell them you value their mission by contributing your interest.

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Our students, children and confirmation youth can begin to learn the seriousness of persecution even when they’re young. 

_How can we help them?

by ELIZABETH AHLMAN

I_iving and working in Leipzig, Germany, it is easy to see and be confronted by the realities of persecution of the Christian Church even as we walk around the beautifully restored and renewed City Center.

And so it happened that one day, not long after moving here, we were touring the City Center with family that had come to visit. We were explaining that the current church-like glass structure on Augustusplatz stands where Paulinerkirche (Paul’s Church) once stood on the University of Leipzig’s campus. It was dynamited during the Communist rule of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Our son Thomas (who was 5 at the time) was struck but somewhat silent, absorbing it. We explained that the government wanted people’s loyalty, and they knew that to do that, they had to destroy Christianity. They had to make themselves the religion of the people.

Later, as we walked through one of the famous passageways in the City Center, we came across some banners commemorating Paulinerkirche. They were pictures of the ruins caused by the Communists. Thomas burst into tears. He cried uncontrollably for some time.

Facing the realities of the persecution of other Christians, even historical persecution, is not easy for us, much less our children. It is an emotional and frightening topic, often rife with horrible stories of death, mutilation and fear. We want to turn our eyes and the eyes of our children away from such realities. But these realities cannot be ignored and can even be wonderful teaching opportunities. On that day, we spoke with Thomas about how the Church is not just a building and that the Lord Jesus Christ sustains the Church and His people no matter what the world may throw at them.

Paulinerkirche was just a building. But it represented what those who hate Christians and Christianity will do to try to stifle it. Persecution occurs when a Christian is deprived of job, livelihood, family, home, citizenship, their place of worship or even their life—simply because they confess that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Persecution is a direct result of the Christian’s confession.

The older German members and Iranian immigrant members of our congregation here know persecution. When you speak with the German members, you hear stories about how going to church during the GDR was a risk. In one town, there was a man whose sole job was to stand at the top of the hill and count parishioners as they went into the church.

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO CONFESS THE FAITH EVEN IN THE FACE OF TAUNTS AND PRESSURE FROM FRIENDS.

For the Iranians, the persecution is even stronger. While many come to Germany and flee Iran for other reasons (such as political asylum), once they become Christians, their lives, as well as those of their families still in Iran, become even more dangerous. For many, their ancestors converted to Islam on pain of death centuries ago, and now that they have returned to the faith of those ancestors, they face hardship, poverty and isolation from their families in Germany and the threat of death if they return.

So how do we help our children, Sunday School students and Lutheran school pupils understand persecution?

> **Use the Scriptures.** Introduce your children to the concept of persecution by teaching about texts such as Stephen’s stoning in Acts 7.

> **Include them in discussion of current events.** Of course, for the very young, protect them from graphic details or pictures, but be honest about the fact that many Christians die for their confession, using current events as an opportunity to discuss this important part of the Christian life.

> **Pray with your children for those who face this persecution.** You can also discuss ways to help persecuted Christians in other lands, such as donating money to the Global Mission Fund of the LCMS or to other organizations that serve asylum seekers in the U.S.

> **Teach your children that Jesus teaches us in Matt. 5:10–11 and other passages that we will face persecution because we confess His name. But in this, we only look like our Savior, who also suffered. As they persecuted Him, so they will do to us.**

> **Encourage your children to confess the faith even in the face of taunts and pressure from friends because when they do, they stand in solidarity with those around the world who confess faith in Christ despite the fact that it means loss of their homes, friends, families, jobs or lives.**

> **Jesus’ persecutors did not have the last word, even when they put him to death. And persecution is not the last word for us either. God’s Word is God raised Jesus to new life, just as we will be raised. So we proclaim the faithfulness of Christ Jesus, who confesses us before His Father in heaven (Matt. 10:31–32).**

Lord Jesus Christ, You know the pain of persecution at the hands of Your enemies. Be with all those who suffer persecution for the faith; strengthen them that they may stand firm in their confession, deliver them from persecution and give them the hope of the resurrection in the face of fear and death. In Your name we pray, Amen.
The Lutheran Church in France has some 700 members. How do they withstand persecution?

by PHILIPPE VOLFF

Can we actually learn something from France about persecution?

As I grew up, persecution was foremost something happening to Christians outside the West, in Communist or Muslim states. But while praying for believers there, I was invited, from school age on, to learn from the persecuted Church in order to prepare for persecution.

But even in our republic, boasting its 1789 Declaration of Human Rights and its secularism, persecution of religion is often understood as freedom from religion. Indeed, France has a record of persecutions against Christians.

What’s France’s history with Christian persecution?

Blandina is the French version of the icon of Roman persecution. She was one of the 48 martyrs of the persecution in Lyon—then Lugdunum, capital of Roman Gaul—under Marcus Aurelius in 172. Among those martyrs was also Pothinus, the elderly first bishop. His successor, Irenaeus, is the presumed author of a report of the event that was included in Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History. Through events like the ministry of Martin of Tours or the Baptism of King Clovis, the Church became established in France—and in a position to become, in its turn, the persecutor.

When Louis XIV revoked Henri IV’s Edict of Nantes, which had allowed bishops to serve in the French wars of religion (watch La Reine Margot) in 1685, the branding iron of persecution marked the Huguenots by prohibition of worship, close watch, prison, deportation, or exile.

The Edict of Tolerance then brought freedom of religion on the eve of the French revolution. But instead, the young republic confis cated the Synod’s buildings, we had large assets compared to the number of our members. These safety rulings have also been perceived as potential oppression by prohibiting worship or shutting down buildings, but experience shows it sometimes does safe guard believers.

What risks for persecution may be on France’s horizon?

France’s 1789 Declaration states: “Unless it is a trouble to public order, no one should be proscribed for its opinions, even religious.” This is one of many hints of the revolutionary spirit that marked the end of the religious struggle and the separation of church and state in Alsatia, members of my generation recount being set aside during religion class in public school.

But, it may be worth a smile that our Synod is nicknamed “missourien,” from Missouri. Our Synod once again began supporting the mission outpost.

In 2002, through the support of the Rev. Francis Poliult’s service to the only confessional Lutheran congregation in Paris, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod once again began supporting the mission outpost.

Is there persecution in France now?

Outside the tragedy of World War II, there is no further record of persecution from the state, state religion, or from another confession. But despite today’s ecumenical movement, new denominations lack official recognition. Under the local state religion system in Alsace, members of my generation recount being set aside during religion class in public school.

Also, it may be worth a smile that our Synod is nicknamed “missourien,” but it shuts down dialogue. Short of trying to link us to the far right—a seemingly mortal sin—the French Protestant Federation has shown no interest for our churches for decades.

Regarding the government, the cult watchdog was organized in 2002 as mission Miviludes. Churches were concerned about the interpretation of the criterion “manipulation mentale” to identify a cult. Our Lutheran charity branch was subject to inquiry from the government since, because we manage the Synod’s buildings, we had large assets compared to the number of our members. These safety rulings have also been perceived as potential oppression by prohibiting worship or shutting down buildings, but experience shows it sometimes does safeguard believers.

Pray for France

In 1934, a Lutheran mission outpost was established in a dense popul ated sector of Paris.

In 2002, through the support of the Rev. Francis Poliult’s service to the only confessional Lutheran congregation in Paris, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod once again began supporting the mission outpost.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church—Synod of France includes nine parishes, 18 congregations, 897 baptized members, 564 communicant members and nine active pastors. It has been a partner church of the LCMS since 1927.

Another concern is Islam. The U.S. has been engaged in a conflict with Islamic terrorism and is seeing a growing movement of Muslims wishing to impose Islamic rules in American cities and towns. Christians should not hope to impress Islam by a mere preaching of the Law. What shines uniquely in Christianity is the Gospel. We are called to witness it to our Muslim neighbors even as the tide of Islam grows stronger.

The common point between these two sources of concern? A ruling society that forces people to forsake their beliefs, to submit to the official creed, is not the way the Lord works. Supporting radical groups such as Femen and members of the LGBT community, National Education Minister Vincent Peillon, who confesses the French Revolution as a religion, believes that children ought to be made to study religion class in public school.

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What can we learn from French persecution?

Reading updates from American friends on the Internet, I see freedom of conscience is a major concern for some Americans who feel threatened by laws violating biblical values and by an ever-more controlling government.

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The Rev. Philippe Volff is pastor of Eglise Evangélique Luthérienne in Woerth, Alsace, France.
Suffering as discipline of the Lord

Why does the Redeemer allow His Church to suffer under Satan, from whom she has already been delivered?

by ROBERTO E. BUSTAMANTE

What would become the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Argentina began in November 1905, in Aldea San Juan, mostly among Russian-German immigrants. The Rev. Roberto E. Bustamante (busto_bustamante@yahoo.com.ar) is a pastor in the Argentine Evangelical Lutheran Church and professor at Seminario Concordia in Buenos Aires.

The Church suffers because she is given participation in Christ's own redemptive story that spins around the paschal event of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Church suffers because her children are confirmed and exercised as sons and heirs of the heavenly Father, who disciplines them because He loves them. The Church suffers because she lives in the threshold of her final and victorious vindication.

These are the stories with which the New Testament articulates the story in which the Church is comforted in the midst of her afflictions. They are not there to exhaust our inquiring "why" in front of the scandalous mystery of God. Rather, we are told these stories—brought into these stories—(1) so that we may rejoice in the midst of our sorrows; (2) because we are privileged with having participation in Christ's body and story; (3) so that we may fear and love the Father who shapes us after His Son's image through those demonic masks behind which He Himself deals with us; and (4) so that we know that the long expected day of the Lord has arrived.

This is nothing else and nothing less that the sanctifying work of the Spirit that, far from being a merely accidental sign of the Church, "gathers, enlightens, andronic in Christ's own redemptive story that spins around the paschal event of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Church suffers because her children are confirmed and exercised as sons and heirs of the heavenly Father, who disciplines them because He loves them. The Church suffers because she lives in the threshold of her final and victorious vindication.

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This is nothing else and nothing less that the sanctifying work of the Spirit that, far from being a merely accidental sign of the Church, "gathers, enlightens, and
Whoever wishes to meet Jesus must meet him in places where brothers and sisters of Jesus are hungry, thirsty, naked, unwanted, sick or in prison. Whoever keeps himself distant from these places remains distant from Jesus.*

So said Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbrand who was sentenced to 25 years in prison for confessing Christ. Persecution is not to be separated from Jesus, but perhaps to be privileged to know Him the better. Consider the hymn, “What is the World to Me with all its vaunted pleasure, When You and You alone, Lord Jesus, are my Treasure?” (LSB 730). Is there a better purifying fire than to know Jesus and suffer for Him? Persecution is of comfort, for in it, we cling to Jesus alone, His Gospel and His promise that we are His dear children in Baptism. In persecution, He holds us to be His own. Christians, like Jesus, are persecuted in both a hostile and passive manner. In Luke, the Pharisees are passive in seeking to deny the credibility of Jesus by saying, “You are a Samaritan and have a demon.” They seek to diminish His identity, His credibility, His message, showing hostility when they take up stones to stone Jesus for confessing Himself as God, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).

In today’s world, Christians who dare to confess themselves against the world’s platform regarding life issues and sexuality are declared intolerant, narrow-minded, and archaic. So, as parents, pastors, and teachers, we cannot do better than instilling into our children a strong baptismal identity from their youth. We can and must remind them, “You are a beloved child of the heavenly Father, and through God the Son, your sins are forgiven, and you are free to confess Him before all people. Boldness to confess Him lies in knowing that you are His dear child, redeemed by His love as did Paul.”

Hatred for love
Hatred for Jesus is countered by love (1 John 3:13–14).

All persecution is first and foremost against Jesus as God (Ps. 2:2).

Hatred for Jesus is countered with love (1 John 3:13–14). Wurmbrand wrote: “A flower, if you bruise it under your feet, rewards you by giving you its perfume,” wrote Wurmbrand in Tortured and Tormented for Christ. “Likewise Christians, tortured by the Communists, rewarded their torturers by love. We brought many of our jailors to Christ. And we are dominated by one desire: to give Communists who have made us suffer the best we have, the salvation that comes from our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Persecution takes two forms: It seeks to deny one’s identity and credibility in Christ (John 8:59; Luke 23:21).

The Romanian communist government organized a Congress of Cults. It was a platform for religious leaders to affirm their loyalty to communism and the new government.

Pastor Wurmbrand’s wife, Sabina, said to him, “Richard, stand up and wash away this shame from the face of Christ.” Wurmbrand warned, “If I do so, you’ll lose your husband.” “I don’t wish to have a coward as a husband,” she replied. In a speech broadcast to the whole country and in front of 4,000 others, Wurmbrand confessed that the Christian is to worship Christ alone.

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Wolves in sheepskin
It is the subtle language of persecution that perhaps catches us off guard as parents. We ourselves do not rightly discern the Word of God. Love everybody, right? And yet our Lord says, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Matt. 12:30).

Pastor Wurmbrand wrote:

Once the communists came to power, they skillfully used the means of seduction toward the Church. The language of love and the language of seduction are the same. The one who wishes a girl for a wife and the one, who wishes her for a night in order to throw her away afterward, both say, ‘I love you.’ Jesus has told us to distinguish the language of seduction from the language of love, and to know the wolves clad in sheepskin from the real sheep. When the communists came to power, thousands of priests, pastors, and ministers did not know how to distinguish the two voices.

We ourselves need to know and teach others to discern between the love of Christ and His truth as found in Scripture and embracing the love that is of the world.

Hatred God
All persecution is unbelief against Jesus and Him as God. The unbelieving Saul meets Jesus on the road to Damascus and hears Jesus say, “Paul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). Pastor Wurmbrand understood this when his natal country of Romania was invaded by a million Russian troops. The Romanian communist government organized a Congress of Cults. It was a platform for religious leaders to affirm their loyalty to communism and the new government.

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Wurmbrand’s example reminds us that it is against Jesus as God and His authority that His enemies rail against. We are comforted by remembering that it is our Lord whom they hate as God. Our prayer is for those who rail against Him, that they too might repent and know His love as did Paul.

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So the murdered Jesus, now resurrected, seeks in love to draw the entire world unto Himself. May it be so for His sake.
On His Account

by TIMOTHY C. J. QUILL

In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), our Lord says we are blessed when we are reviled and persecuted on His account. What does that mean?

A blessing is a good gift bestowed upon another. One does not bless oneself. You cannot give a gift to yourself. Since blessings are gifts, they are neither earned nor deserved. Blessings are grace.

God’s relationship with man consists of continuous blessings that He bestows upon His creatures. These blessings began with the creation of the world and the gift of life (Gen. 1:27–28), and continue throughout the entire biblical narrative of salvation. God promised to bless all nations through Abraham’s messianic offspring (Gen. 22:18). The Church’s biblical hymnbook is filled with references to the Lord showering His blessings upon His people. (Check out the Psalms!)

One week after His resurrection, the risen Lord Jesus taught Thomas the greatest beatitude: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” In this beatitude, Jesus was talking about all of us who have been given the gift of faith to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thus to receive the blessing of eternal life from Him (John 20:29). The ascended and enthroned Lord Jesus tells us, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life” (Rev. 22:14). We were thus washed and blessed when we were baptized.

When Jesus taught His disciples on a mountainside by the Sea of Galilee, He is not offering nine spiritual steps for His disciples to follow in order to obtain blessings. He is blessing them with the divine promise that the poor in spirit will inherit the Kingdom of God. When they mourn, they will be comforted by the Lord Himself (Rev. 7:17). Each blessing comes to God’s people as a divine gift and promise as they face serious difficulties in life. The Beatitudes reach their climax with blessings being bestowed upon those who are undergoing persecution.
Q. What counts as persecution and evil?

Jesus uses three verbs to describe the nature of persecution often faced by confessing Christians: revile, persecute, and utter evil. The verb to persecute emphasizes the idea that it will be a deliberate, ongoing, planned attack that can include everything from verbal lies and slander to physical abuse, torture and murder. Jesus stresses the verbal attacks on His disciples. Lies and slander are experienced by both believers and unbelievers; the difference is that there will be rigorous, intentional attacks on those who confess Christ and the Gospel.

Q. Why should we rejoice and be glad?

Because of the great reward that awaits us in heaven where we will rejoice and be glad with those who have gone before us, all the saints who have died in the faith and through faith in Christ and His Word have experienced a blessed death. This joyful heavenly host includes those who have gone through great tribulation, yet have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:13–14). We prepare and rehearse for our blessed death every time we attend the Divine Service and participate in Holy Communion. Since ancient times, pastors have invited those who desire the Lord's Supper with: “Let us give thanks unto the Lord our God.” To this the faithful respond, “It is meet and right so to do.”

In the Proper Preface for All Saints Day, the pastor continues, “It is truly meet, right, and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to You. . . . You have surrounded us with so great a cloud of witnesses that we, encouraged by their faith and strengthened by their fellowship, may run with perseverance the race that is set before us and together with them, receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Your glorious name . . .”

Q. Can one really prepare to face persecution?

Yes. Jesus gave considerable attention to preparing His disciples for the suffering and crosses that would come their way (Matt. 10:16–39; Mark 4:17; Luke 21:10–19; John 15:18–16:4; 16:33). Preparation for persecution includes learning from those who have suffered and died on account of their confession of the faith. Jesus encouraged His disciples to learn from the Old Testament prophets, “For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:12).

Today, the Church at prayer continues to learn from the saints and martyrs by including them in her church calendars and lectionaries. The Lutheran view regarding the place of the saints in worship is explained in the Augsburg Confession, Article 21. “It is also taught among us that saints should be kept in remembrance so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith. Moreover, their good works are to be an example for us” (Tappert, p. 46).

Q. Can we really rejoice in suffering?

To rejoice is to speak words to music. The response to false words and lies about Jesus Christ and His Church is to speak and sing true words about Jesus, who is true God, the Word made flesh; the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We rejoice and are glad whenever we gather with the Church around Christ and His Word in worship. We sing about our Lord’s persecution, about His suffering, death, and resurrection and what He has done and continues to do for us and our salvation.

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IN GERMANY, AN AWAKENING

by UWE SIEMON-NETTO

This is an awakening,” observed Rev. Gottfried Martens as he said goodbye to hundreds of worshipers filling out of the Lutheran Dreieinigkeitskirche (Trinity Church) in Berlin, the most secularized capital in Western Europe. Sunday service was over. It had lasted over two hours with seemingly endless waves of communicants surging toward the altar while the congregation sang Reformation-era hymns with a fervor seldom heard in German sanctuaries anymore.

Yet most congregations were neither Germans nor even “cradle Christians,” but dark-skinned refugees from Iran and Afghanistan instead. The accelerating rate at which immigrants from these countries turn their backs on Islam is one of the most underreported phenomena in the mainstream media. It outweighs the conversion of nominal Christians to the Muslim faith, according to the central archive of Germany’s Islamic organizations in Soest, Westphalia.

“This development is all the more spectacular if one considers the reasons why members of the two groups change their religion,” said Thomas Schirrmacher, who chairs the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance. “Germans becoming Muslims are mainly girls marrying Muslim men or businessmen hoping for good deals in Middle Eastern countries,” he explained. “The conversion of Persians to Christianity is of a different quality, usually following a long instruction in our faith.”

Rev. Martens, 51, has baptized more than 300 former Muslims in the last three years. This makes him a key figure in a paradoxical situation in the Land of Luther:

On the one hand, the 20 state-related regional churches, numbering a total of 25.5 million, avoid evangelizing among Muslims.

They stress the precedence of “religious tolerance” instead. The large Evangelical Church of the Rhineland even admonished its pastors not to baptize any of these immigrants.

On the other hand, the tiny, 34,000-member Independent Lutheran Church (SELK), an LCMS partner, is in the vanguard of fulfilling the Great Commission among the 150,000 Iranians in Germany. Many of these are severely traumatized by the persecution, imprisonment, and torture they had suffered at the hand of the Muslim regime in their homeland, according to pastor Martens.

In the case of Martens, the mass conversion of Persians started in 2011 when he christened his first Iranian in the Marienkirche (St. Mary’s church), another sanctuary of his congregation in the Zehlendorf district of Berlin.

“A few months later, I baptized a second Persian in the presence of LCMS Pastor Fritz-Adolf Häfner, who was visiting Germany then,” he told The Lutheran Witness.

More and more Persians poured into St. Mary’s to be prepared in three-month classes for Baptism and Holy Communion. Then Martens moved his Farsi-speaking group to the Dreieinigkeitskirche in the neighboring district of Steglitz, a run-down structure belonging to the state-related Lutheran Church of Saxony.

But St. Thomas is not trying to evangelize Muslims, quite to the contrary. The very church that a quarter of a millennium ago gave the world the most beautiful way to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in Bach’s oratorios and cantatas today leads a campaign for the construction of a mosque with four minarets—a house of prayer for a faith denying Christ as the Son of God and Savior.

Meanwhile, in the barrack-like structure of the Independent Lutherans’ Holy Trinity Church a different sense of inter-religious relations prevails. Häfner taught his Persians German by using Luther’s translation of the Bible as a textbook. As a result, they asked to be prepared for Baptism. Before long they brought fellow Muslims along to learn German and the Gospel. “Now one-third of Trinity’s 166 members are of Persian or Afghan descent,” said Markus Fischer, the congregation’s current pastor.

Some subsequently moved on to other cities, such as Berlin where they joined SELK congregations and brought Persian friends along. The first two of Pastor Martens’s candidates for Baptism were from Leipzig.

There’s one further breathtaking side to this tale of hope. In Leipzig’s dilapidated district of Volkmarstadt, Rev. Hugo Gevers, a former mission- ary in Africa, directs a mission center that looks after immigrants and poverty-stricken locals. “We have lots of children from dysfunctional German families there,” said Gevers. “They have never heard of Jesus before. Now some of our ex-Muslims look after these kids and introduce them to the Gospel.”

The accelerating rate at which Muslim immigrants turn their backs on Islam is one of the most underreported phenomena in the mainstream media.
When you meet someone for the first time in Africa, they will inevitably ask you about your family, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. Who you are as an individual is defined by your community, your family. You depend on them; they depend on you. This is especially important in a context of ever-changing variables: war, sickness, death and lack of adequate resources. If you need something, you will ask the family. They are expected to give it and vice-versa. Family celebrations such as births, weddings, funerals, take precedent over other activities. Family defines you and gives you life—even beyond the grave.

In west African villages, you will often see mounds of stones upon which there may be a bowl or a bloodied and charred “seat.” These are altars on the graves of the ancestors. In west Africa, the predominant religious practice is animism, a diverse belief in the powers of the spirits of the deceased and of other created things. Sacrifices of chickens and goats are given to the ancestors to appease them or to encourage them to work for one’s benefit. Sacrifices are offered at all of the family and community celebrations. Everyone is expected to be present, participate in, and contribute to the sacrifice.

This presents a great challenge to Christians. The First Commandment clearly says, “You shall have no other gods before my face.” Furthermore, we learn from Luther’s explanation of the Second Commandment that “We should fear, love, and trust in God that we may have no other gods before us.” Offering sacrifices is forbidden. The Christian has no need to make sacrifices to other spirits and powers for security, well-being, or blessings. This is already finished in the cross of Christ.

When someone in west Africa refuses to offer sacrifices, it is considered a shameful offense to the ancestors, the family. They are shunned. They are essentially cut off from their lifeline, from resources, from support, even from spouse and children. Those who sincerely convert to Christianity often must then live in social isolation or travel far distances to seek a new community.

There is a great temptation to mix the sacrificial system of animism with Christianity. Many Christians who attend church on Sunday, own a Bible, and are baptized in the faith, will set their Christian faith aside when family and social pressure expect them to offer sacrifices. Everyone in the family and community sees this.

We rightly ask, “How could professing Christians mix such an abominable practice with their confession of Jesus?” But we act much the same. We Westerners like to think that we are wholly independent, but we also give into family and social pressure. We go to church. We have been confirmed in the faith. We know our catechisms. Yet, although they are blessings—are not essential practice with their confession of Jesus?” But we act much the same. We Westerners like to think that we are wholly independent, but we also give into family and social pressure. We go to church. We have been confirmed in the faith. We know our catechisms. Yet, although they are blessings—are not.

We have been warned against the false witness. Our Christian faith may separate us from our families, communities and even from our earthly lives. But these—although they are blessings—are not what ultimately define us. Whether we live in impoverished Africa or the coziness of the developed world, we have eternal salvation and security in no other work, word, or sacrifice than that of Christ on Calvary. There is no need to fear any other spirit, power, division or persecution (Rom. 8:35–39). Christ defines you and gives you life—even beyond the grave.

Do we rather prefer to “live and let live,” thinking that the spiritual well-being of our grandchildren, godchildren or even the children on the congregation baptisms roles are none of our business? When the biblical answers to distressing concerns in society are discussed in Bible study, we often agree with the pastor and speak up. But what do we then do with that Word at family gatherings, over lunch break, or at the bar among colleagues and friends? We often are silent out of fear of offending. The Lutheran Church treasures our Lord’s Gospel gift of His true body and blood given and shed for us in the Sacrament of the Altar. We have been taught about close(d) Communion. We have been warned against the false views of the Sacrament by those churches who teach that the Lord’s Supper is our work of remembrance or our sacrifice presented to God. It is very uncomfortable to sit in the pew and watch as other family members go forward to receive Communion at another denomination. We may think, “Pastor is not here to see. So, why not join in?” To give into these temptations is not quite as dramatic as placing a bloodied chicken carcass on your grandfather’s grave, but it is still a mixed witness. It allows others to continue to trust in other things before our Lord Jesus and His Word.

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by JACOB GAUGERT

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Persecution to Know about Americans Need Things

If you haven’t noticed how fast things are changing, pay attention to these five signs that persecution against American Christians is growing.

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This is a quick primer for those still only vaguely aware of how fast the legal weather is changing—five signs of the growing persecution against American Christians.

A change in terms. Elected officials increasingly downplay the First Amendment phrase “freedom of religion” in favor of “freedom of worship.” The former recognizes faith as a pervasive way of life—something that extends beyond church meetings and personal deviations to how one consciously lives one’s daily existence. The latter is legal code for “what happens in church stays in church.” U.S. leaders are moving to present a show of defending faith while actually strictly curtailing its voice and impact in the larger culture.

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The devaluing of conscience. Recent years have seen an alarming surge in lawsuits that seek something fundamentally unjust—forcing private citizens to communicate and promote messages with which they disagree. Many of these suits have been filed by same-sex couples, demanding that wedding photographers, florists, and caterers, for instance, contribute their creativity and talents to same-sex wedding ceremonies. . . . without regard to the personal moral and religious convictions of these professionals on the marriage issue.

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Nor is that pressure limited to cases where the mother’s life is in danger. It is increasingly applied in cases of elective abortions—executions of convenience—that could easily be scheduled to accommodate medical staffers whose talents to same-sex wedding ceremonies, demanding that wedding photographers, florists, and caterers, for instance, contribute their creativity and talents to same-sex wedding ceremonies. . . . without regard to the personal moral and religious convictions of these professionals on the marriage issue.

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Bible reading at recess, invitations to a church Christmas party, a cross in the corner of a picture drawn for art class, a reference to Scripture in a class essay, handing out a Christian tract on a campus quad—all of these have been the basis for lawsuits in countless school districts coast to coast over the last decade. American educators are often going to absurd lengths to defend a mythical definition of the “separation of church and state,” even if that means ignoring the very real protections of the First Amendment.

A growing media hostility. Nowhere was the deepening contempt for Christians in general and religious freedom in particular more glaringly evident than in the recent national uproar over Arizona bill SB 1062—legislation designed to protect the right of people of faith to run their business in accordance with their conscience.

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Successfully painted as a legislative hate crime by media outlets, the actual wording and guileless purpose of the bill was widely ignored in a rush to uninformed judgment that brought the full fury of everyone from major corporations to the NFL down on the state—pressuring Governor Jan Brewer to veto the measure. Editorial pages across the country overflowed with virulent, undisguised contempt for the rights, motives, and character of Christians.

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Where all this social persecution and legal prosecution is going remains to be seen. Much depends on the willingness of American believers to wake up to the changing reality. Freedom is never free, and unless U.S. Christians speak up and embrace our First Amendment protections of religious liberty, our first and most precious freedom doesn’t have a prayer.
Rebuilding Hope

by TARA MULDER

Learn how one organization is helping those who have experienced persecution firsthand.

Refugees, as well as migrants such as asylum seekers, are people for whom migration is forced. They have fled their home and are afraid to return because of violent persecution. That persecution may be based on race, religion, nationality, political affiliation or membership in a social group—the five reasons an individual or an entire population can qualify for refugee status under provisions of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Ministries of mercy and justice

The manner in which LIRS welcomes newcomers is rooted in the belief that migrants and refugees are people of remarkable courage and a blessing to America. Since our founding in 1939, it has been our calling to help uprooted people rebuild their lives. Reflecting the love of Christ with unconditional mercy and practical service, LIRS walks alongside migrants and refugees as they become self-sufficient, connected, and contributing members of their communities. LIRS president and CEO Linda Hartke calls this process “the long welcome,” ensuring that along with skills to be successful, refugees are welcomed in a way that leads to belonging as valued members of the community.

In partnership with a network of local service providers, most of which are Lutheran social ministries, and congregations, LIRS works to provide the “long welcome” to three distinct groups of people.

Refugees

Once refugees are approved for entering the U.S. by the State Department, LIRS arranges their travel from the refugee camp to the community where a service partner welcomes them. Welcome starts before arrival with the setting up of an apartment—often by church volunteers—and continues after arrival by assisting with cultural orientation, job placement, medical care, and other basic needs.

LIRS is proud to welcome people to America for many reasons, not the least of which is religious freedom. Individuals persecuted and tortured for their faith have the opportunity to heal from trauma, gain strength from brothers and sisters in Christ, and experience the joy of joining churches and worshipping openly without having to hide their faith. Albert, a man from Cameroon shares, “Through the help of LIRS and the Liberty Center for Survivors of Torture, I was able to recover from my PTSD and find my walk of life in this welcoming land . . . I have been able to raise my family and remain active in my church.”

Asylum seekers and people in immigration detention

While the protection process for refugees starts overseas, other persecuted people come directly to the U.S. for protection. People who request asylum upon entry to the U.S. are immediately taken to immigration detention in the custody of Homeland Security. LIRS partners working in detention centers ensure individuals have access to the justice system by understanding their rights and securing legal representation.

Visitation ministries by congregations are another critical way the love of Christ is reflected to people in immigration detention. A compassionate visit to someone in immigration detention restores dignity in an often traumatic situation. Community-based support services then become a critical lifeline for people to rebuild their lives and pursue their immigration case.

Unaccompanied children

Sadly, unaccompanied children represent an increasing number of forced migrants. For children arriving alone, LIRS works to reunite them with family members when possible. However, for a number of children, the best option is foster care. LIRS partners with specialized foster care programs to ensure children are safe, able to recover from trauma, and equipped for a bright future.

LIRS is grateful to God for 75 years of ministry and more than 500,000 lives transformed. We pray that as long as there is a need to champion uprooted people, Lutherans will be on the front lines of mercy, justice, and the long welcome.

FOR PEOPLE FLEEING PERSECUTION ON ONE OF THE FIVE GROUNDS OR A CONFLATION OF SEVERAL GROUNDS, FREEDOM IS MORE THAN A RIGHT TO BE ENJOYED; IT IS OFTEN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.
“The Church shall never perish! Her dear Lord, to defend, to guard, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end. ‘Tho’ there be those who hate her, false sons within her pale, Against both foe and traitor she ever shall prevail.’” (TLH 473:3)

The local congregations that we are privileged to be members of all have their ebbs and flows. The congregation where I was baptized in Richmond, Va., is no longer a congregation. That says nothing about the washing I received that was connected to the Word of God. The treasures of God that I received are still in effect. God’s promise and presence remain with me and with all who rejoice in their baptism.

God is with His Church, and He surely knows what His sons and daughters experience. St. Paul the Apostle has great words of comfort found in Ephesians chapter 6. You might even have memorized this portion of Holy Scripture for the great physicality of this text. Read Eph. 6:13-20.

This passage is one of strength and might, but to whom do the strength and the might belong? Just as our faith is not in faith but in Christ Jesus, our strength is not in our own muscle. The Lord is strong. His strength is mighty.

Just as persecution is frighteningly real, so is the devil. Satan is your accuser and he is the father of lies. He is as cunning and scheming today as when he first appeared to Eve in the garden of Eden. The devil is always and everywhere opposed to God and His Church. Read 1 Peter 5:6-9a. How is the devil portrayed? It’s little wonder that this passage is one of the suggested readings for the Compline service, our time of prayer as the day closes.

Go back to Eph. 6:13-20, and list the various pieces of armor that are present. These items are things that can be worn, held and touched. In this particular context, they are items that are of vital importance to a soldier. The soldier was to dress appropriately. They would have known the difficulties and challenges they could have faced in each day.

Though we may not be soldiers, we do know that we face challenges and difficulties because of our faith in Jesus Christ and how that shapes our daily living. Dress appropriately! Why should we pray that the Lord will keep us from instead putting on the belt of deceit, the helmet of scandal, the shoes of hatred, or the breastplate of unholy living?

The promise of God’s certain presence is reaffirmed to us as we look to where God has told us He would be and as we use the gifts He has given us. Ephesians 6:18 begins the conclusion of this section. What are we to do at all times?

Prayer is a gift from God, and our heavenly Father delights to hear the prayers of His children. For what should we pray when we as the Church are being persecuted?

God will defend His Church of which you are a vital member. “Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible” (Eph. 6:23-24).