

Open *Doors*

MAGAZINE | May 2020

Beating isolation

Social media throws
a lifeline to secret
believers

**STAND WITH
YOUR PERSECUTED
FAMILY DURING
THE COVID-19
CRISIS**

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Open Doors is an international ministry serving persecuted Christians and churches worldwide.

Open Doors supplies Bibles, leadership training, literacy programmes, livelihood support and advocacy services. We also mobilise the church in the UK and Ireland to serve Christians living under religious persecution.

If you have any questions about the work of Open Doors, or would like to reprint any of the articles in this magazine, please do get in touch.

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Open Doors UK & I

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Cover image:

Damali* is a secret believer in North Africa. Thanks to your support, she knows she's not alone and has been able to attend discipleship training for young people.

*name changed for security reasons

Letter from Henrietta

Thirst

“It is not good to be alone” GENESIS 2:18

In recent weeks, we've all become used to the idea of 'self-isolation' and what that can mean - on the one hand, protection, but on the other, potential loneliness. As an extrovert, I need people! I have been so blessed to have many people in my life who, over the years, have sown seeds of faith and encouraged and mentored me. I need the warmth of fellowship to survive.

Secret believers in North Africa and other countries on the Open Doors World Watch List, however, don't have that luxury and during Ramadan they can feel particularly alone. The word means 'parchedness' or 'scorching heat' and for new believers this can be an accurate description of their experience. At a time when their faith needs to grow, they are surrounded by fear, ignorance and loneliness.

Islèm's story (p8) breaks my heart: desperate to get to know Jesus but with nobody to show the way. Praise God for the internet! It has provided a wonderful way for us to reach Islèm and others with information, inspiration, fellowship and prayer. Her thirst for the Bible - and friends to share her questions with - shows how important fellowship is and, when face-to-face meetings are not possible, phones and social media are a true blessing from God.

Now that we are all confined to our homes much more, we can appreciate some of what persecuted Christians go through regularly. What a privilege! And I am excited that, at this time, God is continuing to build His church, not only through visions and dreams but also through the internet and social media, thanks to your gifts and prayers. Many Muslims meet Christ during Ramadan and Open Doors has found some brilliant ways to support them and reach people who would otherwise be unreachable, apart from our prayers.

Indeed, just like the internet, our prayers can go where we cannot. As a keen gardener, I grow many plants from seed, some of which take a very long time to germinate. The trick is to keep providing them with warmth, oxygen, light and water, then to wait patiently for growth and not lose your nerve!

Our prayers are like that. We often pray without knowing whether it makes any difference at all. But then we hear stories of people coming to faith and realise that, all the time, the Lord has been at work. So be encouraged as we stand together with our brothers and sisters around the world, and let faith rise in your heart. Together, we can quench the thirst of new believers like Islèm and have the excitement of seeing the desert 'blossom and rejoice' (Isaiah 35:1).



Henrietta

Henrietta Blyth
CEO, Open Doors UK&I



STANDING STRONG LIVE webinars

Stay connected to your persecuted church family and come together with the worldwide church for worship and encouragement through Standing Strong Live webinars, hosted fortnightly on Thursdays from 8.15pm.

While we're not able to meet as a church or see extended family, we can take this opportunity to learn from our persecuted brothers and sisters who know what it is to worship in secret and often on their own. Find out more and register today at www.opendoorsuk.org



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CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

The coronavirus crisis is having a terrible impact in Asia – and Christians are often the last to receive the essential help being distributed. These believers, particularly if they are from a Muslim background, are often considered the lowest in their societies or even infidels. “Some of our most remote communities have been neglected when they were identified as Christians,” says Hana*, a local Open Doors partner.

Thanks to your gifts and prayers, Hana and other Open Doors partners are able to distribute parcels to those in need. “Parcels are going to pastors and partners who are being sidelined and ignored,” she says. “Each parcel is a point of hope and mercy for their communities. They contain enough food and soap to get families through at least two months.” It’s also an opportunity to encourage those facing increasing discrimination, give

Open Doors brings vital aid to Asian Christians impacted by coronavirus



tips on hygiene and safety and show God’s love.

In India, despite the lockdown, Open Doors partners are able to distribute food to those who’ve been sidelined from aid because they are Christians. Arun* and his wife recently had a baby, and he supports an extended family of 12. “Because of the lockdown, I can’t earn any money. We were facing starvation. But suddenly you brought us food! Now we can survive for at least one

month.”

Open Doors partners are reaching persecuted Christians with vital aid across Asia at this difficult time, from the southern Philippines to China. Please keep praying that your worldwide family will get the resources they need – and go to www.opendoorsuk.org to read the latest news and find out how you can support persecuted believers impacted by the crisis.

*Names changed for security reasons

IRAN

Mary is released on bail

Mary (formerly Fatemeh) Mohammadi has been released on bail from Qarchak Prison in Tehran after being arrested while taking part in a protest against the government. Her court hearing has been postponed.

Mary has previously spent time in prison for being part of the underground church. Most recently, her charge

was ‘disrupting public order by participating in an illegal gathering’.

Mary is one of many thousands of prisoners who have been temporarily released, in an effort to stop the spread of coronavirus in Iranian jails: 83,000 prisoners have been released, including seven Christians imprisoned for their faith. There are still at least

ten Christians who remain in prison, however, despite calls from the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran calling for the release all prisoners of conscience currently held in Iran.

Please keep praying for Mary and her family, and for the release of other believers who are still being held in prison for their Christian faith.

CHINA

Virtual church in Wuhan

Pastor Huang Lei was a few steps ahead of the rest of the world when it came to virtual church. He had to be. His church is in Wuhan, China, at the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak that is having such a significant impact on the way all of us meet as communities of believers.

Once it was no longer possible for his church to meet in person, Pastor Huang started organising groups that could meet together online. “First, we have more than 50 groups,” he says. “Praying, studying

the Bible, sharing, witnessing, praising and worshipping. Of those 50, we have more than 30 groups which are spending two hours every day to pray, worship, share and testify together. That’s far more frequent than our normal meetings!”

Pastor Huang’s church isn’t just coping – it’s thriving. “We have heard that our elderly and disabled have been thankful to the Lord and are greatly encouraged by this opportunity for online meetings,” he says. “Before this, they felt alienated,

staying at home alone like they’re abandoned. Now they cherish the connection between believers more than ever. I think it’s bringing us closer than ever. We pray, share information, and make decisions together. The virus can’t stop us.”

Praise God that Pastor Huang’s church is seeing God’s grace in this difficult time, learning more about Him and how to be the body of Christ. Please pray for him as he seeks to connect with ministers across China, and that they would be able to be light in the darkness.

CHAD

“God has answered our prayers”: Damaris’ oxen

Damaris lives in south-eastern Chad – part of West Africa that has seen a rise in Islamic extremism in recent years, including attacks by Boko Haram. She is vulnerable because of her faith and, because she’s a woman, has struggled to raise money for her family.

She and friends from church have been able to attend economic empowerment training, run thanks to Open Doors supporters. It helped Damaris understand a biblical view of work and economics – and, afterwards, she set up a self-help financial group with a few others. “We encourage each other,” Damaris says. “We contribute at least 1,000 francs [about £1.35] during meetings. If someone is in need, the person can borrow money from the group, and repay it later with interest.”

Damaris now runs a small



business investing in crops. “I made good profit and I bought a set of oxen, so we don’t need to rent some for ploughing during the rainy season,” she says. “Now the task is much lighter.

“God has answered our prayers. It is thanks to Him we have been able to do all of this. Your training and group have helped me beyond the financial

benefits: I find joy, peace and love in communion with my sisters.”

For the latest news and stories of courageous faith visit www.opendoorsuk.org

عَيْنِ أَخِيكَ، لَا تَعْتَطُوا الْمُقَدَّسَاتِ لِلْكَلابِ، وَلَا تَطْرَحُوا جِوَاهِرَكُمْ أَمَامَ الْخَنَازِيرِ، لِكَيْ لَا تَنُوسَهَا بِأَرْجُلِهَا وَتَتَقَلَّبَ عَلَيْكُمْ فَتَمَرِّقَكُم.

hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.
"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

Ask, seek, knock

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will you give him a snake, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

The narrow and wide gates

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small

اسألوا، اطلبوا، اقرعوا

اسألوا، تخطوا، اطلبوا تجدوا، اقرعوا يفتح لكم، فكل من يسأل، يلقى، ومن يطلب، يجد، ومن يقرع، يفتح له، وإلا، فأي إنسان منكم يطلب منه ابنه خبزاً، فيعطيه حجراً، أو سكة، فيعطيه حية؟ فإن كنتم وأنتم أشتراراً، تعرفون أن تعطوا أولادكم عظاماً جيدة، فكم بالأولى جداً تعطون أولادكم السماوي عظاماً جيدة للذين يطلبون منه؟ إذن، كل ما تريدون أن يعاملكم الناس به، فعاملوهم أنتم به أيضاً. هذه خلاصة تعليم الشريعة والأنبياء.

الباب الضيق والباب الواسع

دخلوا من الباب الضيق، فإن الباب الواسع يهلك واسع وطريقه رحب، وكثيرون هم يدخلون منه. أما الضيق الباب وأصعب

الطريق المؤدي إلى الحياة، وقيلون يهتدون إليه.

الشجرة وثمرها

احذروا الأنبياء البشالين الذين يأتون إليكم لابسين ثياب الضلال، ولكنهم من الداخل ذئاب خاطفة! من ثمارهم تعرفونهم هل ينجي من الشوك عنب، أو من العليق تين؟ هكذا، كل شجرة جيدة تثمر ثمرًا جيدًا، أما الشجرة الرديئة، فإنها تثمر ثمرًا رديئًا، ولا الشجرة الرديئة تثمر الشجرة الجيدة ثمرًا رديئًا، تثمر ثمرًا جيدًا، تقطع وتطرح في النار. إذن من ثمارهم تعرفونهم، ليس كل من يقول لي: يا رب، يا رب، يدخل ملكوت السماوات، بل من يعمل بإرادة أبي الذي في السماوات. في ذلك اليوم يقول لي: يا رب، يا رب، اربطني باسمك، وتبانا، وباسمك طردنا الشياطين، وباسمك عملنا معجزات كثيرة؟ ولكنني عندئذ أصرخ لهم: أي تم أعرفكم قط! ابتعدوا عني يا فاعلي الإنعام!

البناء الحكيم والبناء الجاهل

فأي من يسمع أقوالي هذه ويعمل بها، أشبهه

and foolish builders

fore everyone who hears words of mine and puts them



BEATING ISOLATION

Social media throws a lifeline to secret believers

You are probably experiencing isolation in a new way this year. Coronavirus has had a widespread impact on all of our lives. Churches have closed. Families can't gather together for special occasions – or even everyday occasions. Whether or not your life was usually very busy, it's likely that your experience of Christian community has changed dramatically in 2020.

The measures brought in to combat the spread of coronavirus are not persecution, of course. They do not specifically target Christians. But perhaps they help

us to understand a bit more what life is like every day for secret believers around the world. Online communication is doubly a lifeline for them – it is a means for people to hear the good news of Jesus in places where sharing the gospel is prohibited, and new believers can be discipled and trained online too.

Islèm*, in North Africa, was brought up in a Muslim family. As far as her father knows, she is still a Muslim. But this 22-year-old student is courageously following Jesus in secret – and she found out about Him online.

“I TRIED TO FIND OUT WHO JESUS WAS”

First, when she was still in primary school, she happened to see a Christian woman thanking God in prayer on television. That was the first thing that piqued Islèm’s interest: “In Islam, we always ask God to give us something, but we have never thought of thanking Him for something.”

Unable to ask her family or community questions about Christianity, Islèm started exploring online. “I tried to find out who Jesus was. I wanted to know why this woman was praying to Him and thanking Him. Who was Jesus?”

Sadly, Islèm’s initial searching didn’t lead to helpful answers. She tried to connect with friends in Syria: “They were Christians and I was a Muslim trying to know more about Jesus. At the same time, I tried to tell them about Islam, so it led to confusion and they ended their contact with me.”

One of the main reasons that

Islèm’s search came to a dead end at this point was that she didn’t even know it was possible to become a Christian, given her upbringing and where she lives. “At that time, I thought there were no Christians in North Africa. I thought I’d be the first one. For me, Christians were people living abroad.”

It’s unsurprising that Islèm hadn’t met any Christians living in her country, which we can’t identify for security reasons. Across North Africa (with the exception of Egypt), the number

“I thought there were no Christians in North Africa”



Islèm discovered the life-changing message of Jesus through Facebook

of Christians is tiny. Those who do follow Jesus in this region have to do so secretly, individually or through the underground church. The laws and restrictions differ across different countries, but most believers in North Africa would face extreme persecution from government, community and family members if their faith were widely known. It can be incredibly isolating to follow Jesus and not know anybody else who follows Him too. And the threat of persecution makes it very dangerous to tell other people about Christianity. In many parts of the region, telling

a Muslim about the gospel is illegal.

That’s why online outreach is so important in North Africa. It can reach people who would otherwise be completely alone with their questions.

FINDING JESUS ON FACEBOOK

A few years later, when Islèm was 15, she spent some time in hospital with a kidney infection. Home life had been increasingly difficult, and her father was being aggressive to her mother. Islèm was struggling psychologically. She knew there was something missing.

When she was out of hospital and recovered, her parents separated and Islèm moved to her grandparents with her mother. Islèm went seeking online again: “The first thing I did when I came home was to use my smartphone and go on Facebook – and while I was on the landing page, I saw a page called ‘Christians in [Islèm’s country*]’ .” Open Doors partners didn’t create the particular page

that Islèm saw, but this form of social media discipleship and outreach is increasingly becoming the way Open Doors partners are reaching seekers and new believers.

“It was strange for me,” continues Islèm. “I clicked on it, but then stopped it. I switched off my phone. When I switched it on again – again, the same page in front of my eyes. Maybe there was something, maybe it was a sign. I clicked on it and sent a message. I was curious about what would happen.”

At first, people were hesitant to respond to her. Partly that was because Islèm’s Facebook

profile clearly showed that she was a Muslim. Secret believers in North Africa have to be cautious when reaching out or responding to someone they don’t know, of course.

Thankfully, the people she’d contacted eventually realised that she was genuinely seeking. She spoke to a pastor, and he arranged for a Bible to be brought to her: “A girl came with her brother to give me a Bible. She said they went to a church – I asked them if I could come with them, and she said yes. I went to church and it was great!”

THE WAY AND THE RISK

And so Islèm found a community of believers to learn from, keeping her exploration secret

from her parents. Not long after, she attended a Bible study group run by Open Doors partners, funded by Open Doors supporters: “That was

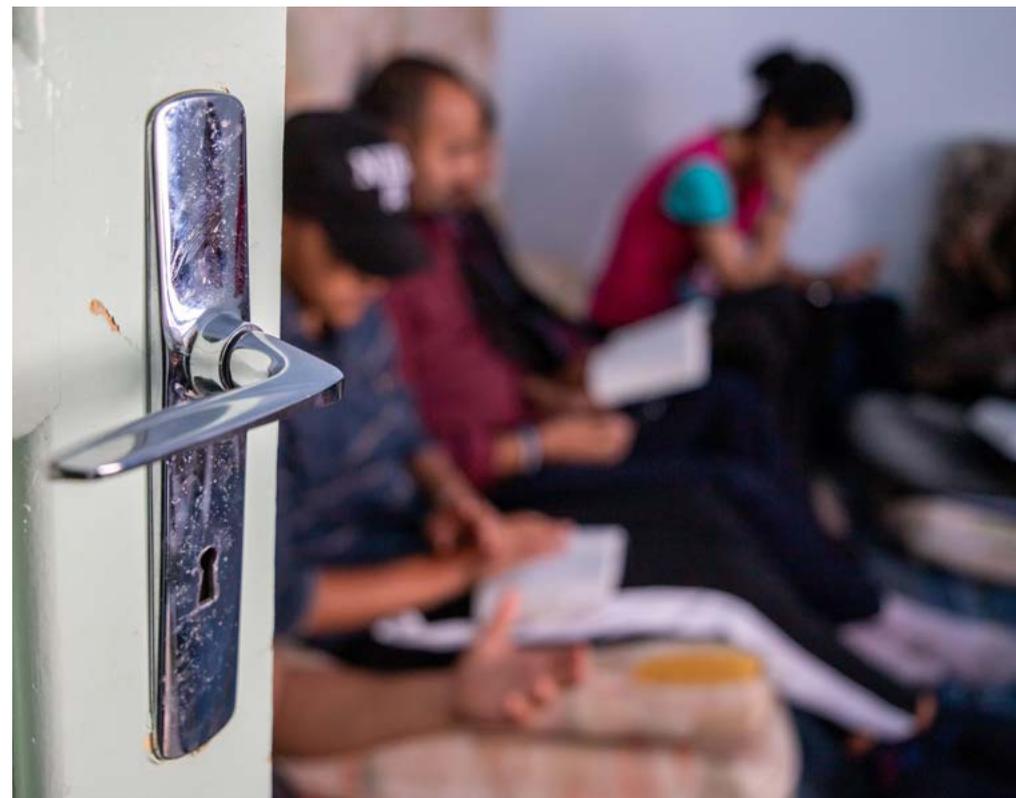
“Jesus is like oxygen, because without oxygen you cannot breathe”

the first time I read the Bible, with a pastor explaining the verses. On that day, the pastor was teaching John 14:6, ‘Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”’.

“While he was explaining this, I felt as if he was answering

the questions I had when I was at the hospital. On that day, I became a believer.” Islèm kept going to the church, and praying with the pastor and his wife. She read the Bible whenever she could: “To me, reading the Bible was like eating; it was a need. I wanted to read more and more. I was really happy. I felt at ease.” And two years later, she was baptised, praise God!

All the time Islèm was learning about Jesus and attending training seminars (which are funded by the gifts and prayers of Open Doors supporters), she had to keep her faith secret: “My family still thinks that I am a Muslim,” says Islèm. “Only my mother knows that I am a Christian, and she accepts it. My father does not



Thanks to your support Islèm was able to attend a Bible study run by Open Doors partners for secret believers

HOW IS CORONAVIRUS AFFECTING CHRISTIANS IN NORTH AFRICA?

For many secret believers in North Africa, the coronavirus crisis is intensifying the social exclusion that comes from choosing to follow Jesus. Like the rest of the world, they now face further isolation measures designed to prevent coronavirus spreading.

On top of increased isolation, many Christians in North Africa have also lost their income as work becomes impossible. For those who no longer have a family network to support them, the loss of income is even more devastating. Some have already run out of money and can't buy the food they need.

OPEN DOORS' RESPONSE
As the spread of coronavirus makes face-to-face discipleship and training impossible, Open Doors partners are increasing their online programmes in North Africa, offering outreach, training, Bible reading, prayer and spiritual encouragement. Local churches are asking our partners to organise online ministry and training. These online projects were already lifelines to many secret believers; now they are critical to the survival of the church.

Open Doors is also working with local churches to assess the needs of those who have lost their income, and offer practical support and relief aid where it is most needed.

Your prayers and gifts can enable Open Doors to be a vital lifeline of support to the most isolated believers at the time when they most need it.



The real Islèm. Her identity has to be kept secret for her safety

know anything about it." The only times she has raised the topic of Christianity with her father, he has responded violently. "I thought that, if I said anything more, he would kill me," she says. It's too dangerous for Islèm to live her faith openly.

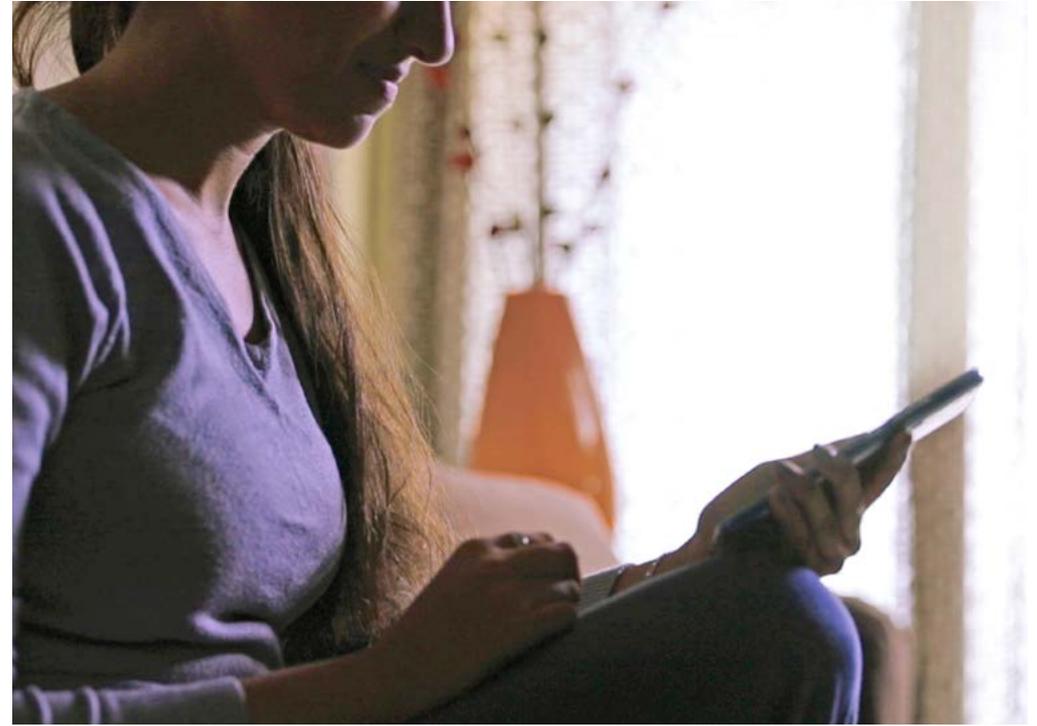
"JESUS IS LIKE OXYGEN"
Islèm speaks passionately about her relationship with Jesus now: "Jesus is like oxygen, because without oxygen you cannot breathe. If Jesus were not in my life, I wouldn't be here today, I would not be alive. It is as if I were taken out of the waste bin and cleaned. No matter what happens in my life, I can't leave Jesus."

Without that initial Facebook group that led Islèm to the answers she needed, she might still be waiting for an encounter with Jesus and the life she is receiving from Him. The Bible tells us 'seek and you will find' (Matthew 7:7) – in the 21st century, seeking can increasingly mean searching on Facebook! There will always be a vital role played by face-to-face

"...in the Bible, we are told that we need to be a united community; we Christians should be one body."

discipleship and evangelism, of course, and for smuggling physical Bibles to secret believers who can't get them – but there is a vital place, particularly during this pandemic, for outreach that takes place on social media and elsewhere online.

ISOLATED BELIEVERS
Despite all she goes through, Islèm is in some ways one of the luckier ones, though that's hard to believe. She's a secret believer and none of her close friends and family follow Jesus, but she has been able to meet with other Christians – though this may change, of course, given the impact of coronavirus (see box). Many secret believers in North Africa are completely isolated, and never see another Christian face-to-face. They've never been able to attend a service. Some have never even met another believer. That's why online discipleship and training is so valuable.



Social media provides a vital lifeline for secret believers in North Africa, so that they know they're not alone

As Islèm says, "I am sure that, even if I were alone, God would not have forsaken me. But in the Bible, we are told that we need to be a united community; we Christians should be one body."

It's a great privilege that we, in the UK and Ireland, get to be part of that same united community with Islèm. Open Doors' vision is to see a strong global church, defying persecution, standing together and sharing Jesus no matter the cost. That means we have to stand with secret believers in North Africa and across the world, who are courageously following Jesus despite the danger. Online programmes can show these believers that they aren't alone, and the encouragement that your prayers and gifts make possible can be life-changing for your brothers and sisters. This

can prevent their young faith fading or dying, and instead help them grow as warriors of faith! You can be the lifeline that seekers and secret believers like Islèm need today. And they need it more than ever, as the coronavirus crisis adds further isolation to the isolation and vulnerability they already face for choosing to follow Jesus. For many, these programmes are now a matter of survival.

PLEASE GIVE

Every £38 could provide digital training and discipleship for a young believer from a Muslim background

Every £56 could provide relief aid to a family of persecuted believers impacted by the coronavirus lockdown

Every £70 could mean 35

people are reached by the church through social media.

You can give at www.opendoorsuk.org. Thank you so much for your support.

PLEASE PRAY

- For believers to be protected from coronavirus, and for food and resources for those who are no longer able to get an income at this time
- For online programmes run by Open Doors partners to reach seekers and disciple secret believers
- That isolated believers in North Africa would know God's love, presence and comfort and that He would keep them firm in their courageous faith.

AS IRON SHARPENS IRON...

LESSONS IN ISOLATION FROM THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

In these strange and shifting times, it can be easy to give in to fear and anxiety. The good news is that our God never changes! He is the rock upon whom we can build our faith and our certainty. This is something our persecuted church family knows plenty about – and we need to learn from their stories and their faith now more than ever. Here are some lessons that can help us to navigate these uncertain times.



1 WE BELONG TO A FAMILY THAT HELPS ONE ANOTHER

“I pray also for those who will believe in me through [My disciples’] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You.” (John 17:20-21)

Jesus wants His church to be unified – to be one worldwide family of God. Thanks to your prayers and support, Rikiya (PICTURED BELOW, WITH HER DAUGHTER) from northern Nigeria is getting back on her feet after her village was attacked by Boko Haram: “You are the ones who brought hope and healing back to me,” she says. “Honestly, if not for the loan I received to rear these goats, I don’t know what I would have done.”

The persecution faced by believers like Rikiya isn’t the same as the isolation and fear that we are facing now – but the lesson is the same: it’s more important than ever to love and help one another.



2 WE ARE NOT ALONE

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders...” (Hebrews 12:1)

Knowing that there is a worldwide family praying for one another can be a great source of encouragement. Eun Hye* escaped persecution in North Korea. When she finally reached safety, she was deeply touched by the prayers of Open Doors supporters around the world. “I had no idea so many people were praying for us,” she says. “Those prayers are really important. They will lead more people to Jesus Christ in North Korea.”

Do keep praying for each other and for persecuted Christians – who are often among the last to receive emergency relief in times of crisis.



3 JESUS HAS OVERCOME THE WORLD

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Rohan* (PICTURED ABOVE) is an Indian Christian whose church was deliberately burned down. But he didn’t lose sight of God’s sovereignty: “I never thought about giving up. I trusted that God would act... My fellow pastors reminded me that God is faithful to the persecuted church.”

Regardless of the situation for Christians, because of Jesus, we can have confidence and hope. While this can be hard for our minds to comprehend in light of current times, we only have to look at the example of our persecuted family to see this kind of faith in action.

4 GOD IS OUR REFUGE, AND OUR STRENGTH

“My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:2)

For persecuted Christians, the Holy Spirit’s constant assurance that God is there as their strength helps them to keep persevering.

Lazar* is a church leader from Uzbekistan. His church was raided by police, who took all the church’s Bibles. He says, “The evening after the raid, I read Psalm 91. God is my refuge and my strength... I don’t want to allow myself to be governed by fear, because that doesn’t help you at all.”

Lazar’s example can inspire us to live and serve during the coronavirus crisis, without being governed by fear – and instead live in the knowledge that God is our help, strength and refuge.

5 GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY AND WE ARE NOT ABANDONED

“Those who know your name trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.” (Psalm 9:10)

“I am always amazed by how God works in mysterious ways to answer our prayers and meet our needs,” explains Aditi* (PICTURED BELOW), a 16-year-old believer from India whose family experienced severe persecution for following Jesus. “All this time, God just wanted to teach us how to trust in Him, and now we know that He is trustworthy. He never abandoned us.”

God is there, even when it can be hard to see His hand. This time of uncertainty is an opportunity to pray for God to open our eyes to what He’s doing around us, and have the courage to follow Him, love our neighbours and live for Him.



PRAY

We are praying for all of you. Here are some ways you can be praying with us:

- That the church worldwide will be the light of hope in these dark times, caring for those around us and comforting those who mourn
- For God’s protection and provision for persecuted Christians in countries where they have little or no access to vital healthcare and relief aid.

*Names changed for security reasons

“God changed everything for this one soul”

THE BOLDNESS OF BIBLE-SMUGGLERS



ABOVE Brother Andrew with his Bible-smuggling VW Beetle

BELOW The anxious wait at the border with hidden Bibles

Sixty-five years ago, Brother Andrew – the founder of Open Doors and the original Bible smuggler – set in motion a courageous legacy that continues today. While advances in technology mean that most Bibles and Christian literature are now passed on in digital form – through MP3s, memory cards and audiobooks – there are still churches that request Bibles in print. And, where possible, our secret networks continue to deliver them, thanks to your prayers and support.

ALL-NIGHT INTERROGATION

In Luke’s Gospel, we read the parable of the shepherd – Jesus – leaving the 99 sheep for the one that had wandered off. John*, a modern-day Bible smuggler, witnessed the reality of that parable for himself when he got caught with a suitcase of Bibles at the border of an Islamic country in the Middle East.

“I was held and interrogated at the police station for many hours during that night,” he says. “I was questioned by customs officers and local policemen; there were seven of them. Sometimes two entered the cell and asked questions. Once there were even five interrogators at the same time.”

‘I WAS DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS’

Around 3am, John struck up a conversation with the guard who oversaw the prison cells. “The man said that I was different from the others,” John recalls.

“I started to talk with him. At a certain moment he told me that his father was seriously ill.”

John didn’t hesitate and asked if he could pray for the officer’s father.

“He agreed and I prayed for the man. After that, I told him my testimony and explained how important Jesus is for me... He accepted Jesus as his Saviour. I had tears in my eyes.”

The official promised to help John. By 8am, he had given John the Bibles back and taken him to the airport!

“All the time since my suitcase was opened until I entered the aeroplane, I thanked the Lord,” says John. “I had peace, the peace of God that transcends all understanding. I saw the hand of God in all that happened. It went different than I had planned. He decided to change everything for this one soul. I was just a spectator. Thanks to my Father, thank You Jesus.”

A VITAL MISSION

Thanks to supporters like you, in 2019, Open Doors’ secret networks distributed around 24,000 Bibles and other Christian literature to believers in North Africa; 132 Christian leaders were trained, and 1,417 believers were disciplined!

It cannot be overstated how precious Scripture is to persecuted Christians – it is absolutely crucial for discipling new believers and growing churches.

Colin*, an Open Doors staff member who oversees these smuggling trips, says, “I thank God that most of our Bible-smuggling trips work out well. Often, the travellers give testimonies after their travel about how God protected the special luggage they were carrying.

“We would like to thank all those who contribute to the distribution of Bibles, books and Gospels”

“Having Bibles, having Christian books and discipleship material is crucial for a growing church with new believers.”

One secret church leader says, “We are grateful for the Christian literature that we regularly receive. A few years ago, our church suffered a lot from lack of literature –



Thanks to your gifts and prayers, Open Doors is still able to smuggle Bibles today, mostly in digital form

especially Gospels for new converts... Thank you that you help us.”

Digital forms of Scripture are also greatly appreciated. Another church leader says, “We would like to thank all those who contribute to the distribution of Bibles, books and Gospels. We had difficulties with the believers who can neither read nor write, especially the elderly. We were so happy with the arrival of memory cards and audiobooks... Glory to God!”

PLEASE PRAY

• For all believers who are currently without Scripture – pray that God will provide them with His Word

- Bible smugglers like John are essential to the continuing work of Open Doors, to strengthen churches and Christians who are determined to keep sharing Jesus no matter the cost. Please continue to pray for their protection, and for all those taking great risks to deliver God’s Word to all those who are hungry for it
- For Open Doors partners stepping up their online presence in response to the Covid-19 crisis, to support believers in the region with online teaching, encouragement, Bible-reading and prayer apps.

*Name changed for security reasons

THANKS TO SUPPORTERS LIKE YOU

in 2019, Open Doors’ secret networks distributed around **24,000 Bibles and other Christian literature** to believers in North Africa; **132 Christian leaders were trained, and 1,417 believers were disciplined!**

Seeing Change for persecuted women

THE ONGOING IMPACT OF THE HANDMADE PETITION...



Last year, over 16,000 Open Doors supporters added their name to the handmade petition, a collection of thousands of embroidered fabric squares sewn together to say "I see you" to women who are doubly vulnerable to persecution because of their faith and gender. This year, the petition has been continuing to raise awareness of the plight of persecuted women in churches and conferences across the country.

IN BIRMINGHAM

In January, the handmade petition arrived at St Martin's Church in the Bullring in Birmingham. Over 2,000 people visit the building every week, and from the moment the team started setting up there was lots of interest.

The public responded really positively to the petition. One visitor said, "Every time I look at it there's something else to see; you can look two, three times and there's always something new to consider."

With the church being in such a prominent area of the city, hosting the display was a way for St Martin's to stand with their persecuted family and share their story widely. The church also received a school tour, so over 150 secondary school students were exposed to the story of persecuted Christians around the world.

While the tour of the handmade petition has now been paused due to the coronavirus outbreak, we hope to see the petition hosted again at different locations around the country towards the end of the year.



AT THE JUSTICE CONFERENCE

In February, the petition visited the Justice Conference at Wembley Drum in London, where hundreds of passionate and active Christians gathered for three days to focus their

attention on the biblical call to justice. It was really encouraging to see people's responses to the stories of persecuted Christian women, as well as the empathy and personal connection many felt as they looked at the beautiful petition squares which many of you created!

Christian women who are targeted for their faith often remain hidden because of their gender. We asked those at the conference to consider writing to their local MP to: (1) explain why this issue was important to them, and (2) encourage their MP to commit to three pledges.

AT THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

In March, artist Hannah Rose Thomas's 'Tears of Gold' portraits were displayed at the FCO. You may remember that Hannah visited an Open Doors trauma centre in northern Nigeria and led art therapy sessions with women who had survived persecution from Boko Haram. This exhibition was an incredible opportunity to bring the testimonies of God's goodness and healing to the

heart of government. The Prime Ministers' Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Rehman Chishti MP, attended the exhibition and tweeted that he was 'delighted to attend the exhibition highlighting the strength and suffering of women who have been doubly victimised by religious persecution and gender-based violence'.

The hope of the exhibition, as explained by the artist, was 'to help shine a light on and elevate the dignity of women from some of the most persecuted communities around the world'.



Artist Hannah Thomas with Rehman Chishti, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy at the FCO in March.

She said it was 'a privilege to share the stories of these courageous women through the paintings at every opportunity'.

AND PARLIAMENT IS LISTENING...



Thank you to everyone who has taken part in our latest advocacy campaign for persecuted women, asking MPs to sign the three pledges to support women from religious minority communities who are doubly

vulnerable to persecution. MPs have been responding to the recommendations. Following International Women's Day on 8 March, further profile was given to the issue by Jim Shannon MP in a House of Commons debate

on freedom of religion or belief on 12 March.

Carla Lockhart MP and Kate Green MP also submitted written questions regarding, respectively, the protection of women in religious minority communities who are especially vulnerable to persecution, and to ask what is being done to include religious minority communities in the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) agenda. We are delighted to see that the government is beginning to recognise the issue in policy.

CALL TO PRAYER FOR DECISION MAKERS

Despite the coronavirus outbreak, Parliamentarians are still using their voices to speak out on behalf of persecuted Christians. And we want to show them our support as they do all they can in our communities to respond to the virus.

We have been asking you to send in photos of prayers to be passed on to MPs and UK government civil servants. Your responses so far have been

amazing - thank you! You can still send in your prayers by taking a photo and emailing them to advocacy@opendoorsuk.org or by posting them on social media and tagging @opendoorsuk with the hashtag #WeStandTogether Please send your prayers by 31 May.



THANK YOU!

Thank you for continuing to pray and act on behalf of your persecuted family. These examples show that your voices are having an impact and MPs are listening. Let's continue to pray for our leaders and persecuted family throughout this season, declaring that He is still good, and His plans will never fail.



SPREAD HOPE IN IRAN WITH OUR NEW CHILDREN'S RESOURCE!

Iran has been badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Spread a little hope and encouragement instead by sending a message to Iranian children with our new letter-writing guide for children.

"OPEN THE DOOR!"

When Rachel* in Iran had an amazing encounter with Jesus, little did she know what it would mean for her family. But out of love for her Lord, becoming a house church leader was a risk she was prepared to take.

At 9pm one evening the doorbell rang. A group of six agents were knocking loudly on the door and calling her name. "The door was even shaking. It was really frightening," says Rachel. She immediately went to her daughter and hugged her. "She was shaking in my arms. I said, 'Don't be afraid. It's nothing. I'm with you.'"

But Rachel and her husband were afraid - because there was lots of evidence in the house that they were Christians. Eventually, the agents left, but they later returned when Rachel was alone. This time they carried Rachel off to prison and interrogated her for 15 days, forbidding her to speak to her daughter.



HAMI'S STORY

Stories like this are not unusual in Iran where all ethnic Persians are expected to be Muslims. Christianity is seen as a Western influence and a threat, so to become a Christian or share the gospel is a dangerous act. Prison is a potential reality for believers who secretly meet in small house churches, and this obviously impacts on their children, too.

That's why we've produced our latest animated film for children here in the UK and Ireland, to help them understand, through a fictional retelling, what life can be like for Christians in Iran. You can find the film 'Hami's Story' on the Open Doors website, with a downloadable activity session that explores the question 'Is Hami free?'

NEW EDITION OF POST IT!

Children in your church and family can also connect with real Iranian children by sending digital pictures of encouragement - to help them know they're not alone. Guidelines and the all-important information can be found in the latest edition of *Post It!* - our letter-writing guide for children - which includes a new spread on the drawing campaign for Iran.

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN HELP:

- Order *Post It!* and read the guidelines for how to send encouragement to children in Iran.
- Download the 'Is Hami free?' children's session plan from www.opendoorsuk.org/children-at-home
- Watch the film 'Hami's Story' with children.
- Invite children to pray and draw pictures.
- Send drawings digitally to drawingsforchildren@opendoorsuk.org

Lots of you are incredibly generous and give not only time, but also money to help persecuted Christians around the world. With your financial support we can advocate for Christians imprisoned for their faith and organise trauma care training for those who've fled Iran. Former house church leader Saman* says:

"The training has offered me long-lasting refreshment. My friends say I have become stronger. I am encouraged that you visit us, that my story is shared, and that people pray for me. You can't imagine how much it means to me to know that I am not alone in this."

*Names changed for security reasons

MORE RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN

Post It! is just one of many resources available for children and families during this season. On the Children at Home page of the Open Doors website you will find a regularly updated list of videos, stories and fun activities to help connect children with the persecuted church.

The activities range from colouring sheets featuring Bible verses and representative scenes from the persecuted church, to a downloadable activity that will help children create a model of a North Korean secret house church, complete with miniature Bibles!

Visit www.opendoorsuk.org/children-at-home and pick and mix for hours of serious fun!



Please don't send physical drawings as we won't be able to send them. Thank you.





DANGEROUS DISCIPLESHIP:

“I thought I was the only believer in Yemen”

A secret resistance is growing in Yemen despite the ongoing war: the church. And it's growing because brave individuals and groups are hearing God's call and stepping out in faith.

Mohammad*, a secret Yemeni believer, became a Christian when he bought a Bible in a second-hand shop. Curious about the contents, he read it, and gave his life to Christ.

“When I came to faith, I thought I was the only believer in Yemen,” he says. In many countries like Yemen, where believers have to keep their faith secret, new Christians can feel very isolated in their faith. It's hard to find a community. “For a long time, I didn't know any other Yemeni Christians.

Now I know many, and there are many more like us.”

Yemen remains number 8 on the Open Doors World Watch List for the second year in a row. All Yemenis are considered Muslims and leaving Islam is forbidden, so Muslims who decide to follow Jesus risk the death penalty. There are no open church activities or private worship.

“For a long time, I didn't know any other Yemeni Christians”

“WE STAY SEPARATED”

And yet, knowing they risked their lives, Mohammad and Alima*, his wife, started not one, but four secret house groups in their home: two for women, two for men. The meetings,

which last around three or four hours, usually consist of prayer, reading the Bible and singing songs together using worship found on YouTube.

The danger of meeting together is very real. Mohammad says, “There is a lot of noise coming from the streets where we live, and this helps disguise our singing. Our neighbours don't recognise our singing as being Christian songs.”

Although meeting in groups is possible, there is still a strong sense of isolation in the Yemeni church: house groups do not have contact with each other. “We stay separated, and each group doesn't know the whereabouts of other groups. This is so there can be no betrayal of others if a group is discovered,” Mohammad explains. “Security is very important for all of us. It is

always a major concern.”

But it's not just governing laws that impact believers in Yemen – the ongoing civil war adds another dynamic of persecution. Because aid relief is mostly distributed through Islamic organisations and local mosques, who allegedly discriminate against citizens who are not considered to be pious Muslims, Christians can miss out on vital emergency aid.

“We often hear of whole families coming to Christ.”

Despite the dangers, Mohammad and Alima have developed a deeper understanding of what it means to trust in God. “We understood how God took care of us. He continued to do so. For example, in this time of war, many times we could only buy small amounts of food, but we always managed to find enough for our family.”

“THE CHURCH IN YEMEN IS DEFINITELY GROWING”

The couple have had to flee Yemen with their children because of their faith. Even though they are now far away, they stay closely connected to

the church in their homeland.

Mohammad says, “When the war is over, I hope we can return to Yemen. I hope that one day I will see the church growing, bearing a lot of fruit.

“We hope that the Word of God will spread in Yemen and that Yemen will be won by Christ. That is our daily prayer. The church in Yemen is definitely growing. That is what you hear everywhere... We often hear of whole families coming to Christ.”

Open Doors supports the body of Christ on the Arabian Peninsula through prayer and distributing Bibles and other Christian literature, as well as training believers and pastors.

“Because of terrorism and war, people abroad might have negative thoughts about Yemeni people,” says Mohammad. “But they are good people, they need to hear the gospel; their hearts are willing to receive. I believe that when we work and pray, we will see big results, we will see much more fruit.

“Please pray for the Yemeni people. Pray that the number of leaders will grow and that the church will be united under one umbrella, the one Head of the church: Jesus.”

*Names changed for security reasons



(ABOVE) For believers' safety, secret house churches must keep separate from each other.

PLEASE PRAY:

- That the church in Yemen will continue to grow in faith and boldness, and that God would provide opportunities for believers to be salt and light
- That relief aid would get through the borders and that it would be distributed fairly and without discrimination
- For God's peace and healing to be poured out on the nation.



SHARE THEIR STORIES... STEP OUT IN FAITH

Want to grow courageous faith in your church or small group? We've produced lots of new resources to help you share the stories of the persecuted church, including the World Watch List: Top 50 Guide... Go online to download or order today at opendoorsuk.org/resources

You can find out more about staying connected to the persecuted church on p22.

CHURCH at HOME

GREAT RESOURCES FOR YOUR HOME SERVICES FROM OPEN DOORS

Churches are closed. Isolated Christians are worshipping in their own homes. Services are shut down. In a way, we've all joined the underground church.

Of course, being quarantined in your own home because of Covid-19 isn't the same as being under house arrest for your faith. Yet it's still a form of isolation and, difficult though these times are, they can help us to understand a little of what life is like for those who have been self-isolating for years – not because of a biological virus, but because their faith is seen as toxic and dangerous.

For those who must keep their faith hidden, worshipping in small groups, in homes and apartments is their usual form of church. We're learning what secret believers must learn: that church looks very different when you worship in your own homes, that text and mobile technology is a vital lifeline to communication, and that there is enormous strength to be found in simply knowing that others care about you.

THE GLORY OF THE CHURCH

Perhaps we have or will discover some deeper truths as well. That God is with us, whatever we are going through. That despite closures in our society, He is still at work and there is always hope. That the church cannot ever be fully quarantined or confined.

Writing to the church at Ephesus, Paul included this wonderful prayer:

"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!" (Ephesians 3:20-21)

Paul wrote that prayer for a church which didn't look very 'glorious' by worldly standards. It looked like a small group of marginalised, mainly poor people meeting in homes, workshops or apartments.

Paul helps us see that the glory of the church isn't in external appearances: the glory lies in the power of God at work within us. And, as the example of the persecuted church shows, wherever and however the church gathers, it can still demonstrate the glory of Christ.

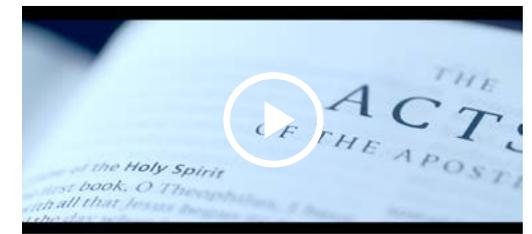
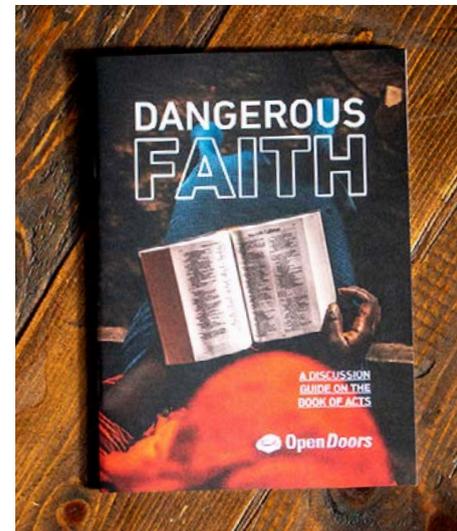
RESOURCES TO HELP

Over the past few weeks, we've been doing what we can to resource churches in this season and to help you remain connected to our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world.

You can find a range of articles on the Open Doors website reflecting on how the persecuted church is coping with Covid-19. And, if you haven't already discovered it, the Church at Home section of the website contains a range of resources which are ideal for anyone doing church at home – everything from videos, to prayer resources and home group materials.

There is also a Children at Home webpage with colouring-in sheets, stories, videos and numerous fun activities. Not only will these keep children busy while they're at home, they'll also help develop their understanding of Jesus' secret underground church. Many of the activities can be used with children's groups meeting remotely, too.

Opposite are just a few highlights from the range of resources available.

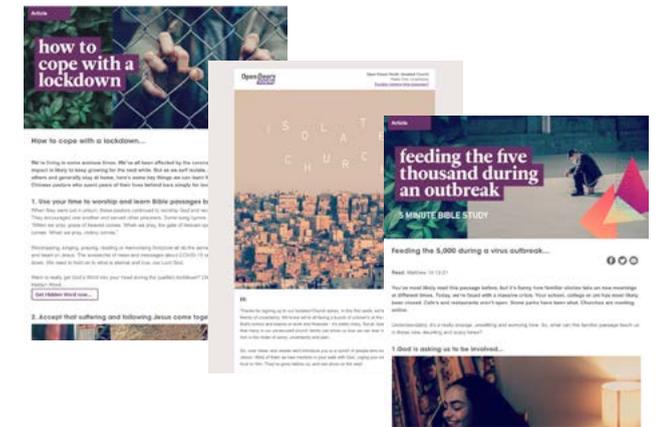


DANGEROUS FAITH

Journey back to a time when every church was a house church. Perfect for Pentecost, this eight-part series is a journey through the book of Acts with the persecuted church. Eight videos, with accompanying discussion guide.

ISOLATED CHURCH

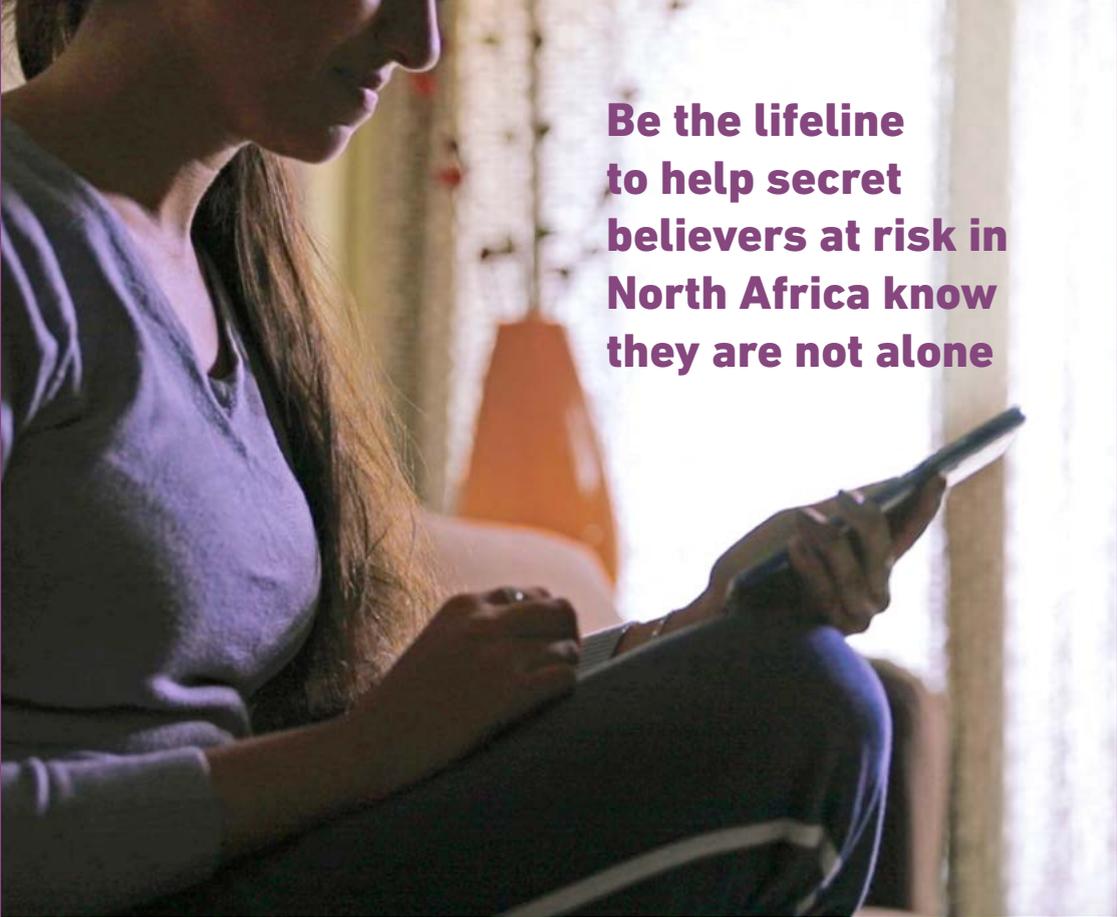
Materials inspired by the persecuted church to help young people grow with God during the lockdown. Featuring stories of brave and courageous faith, videos and podcasts, and simple activities that young people can do from home and on their own.



PRAYER NEWS

Designed for prayer groups and churches, these inspirational stories from the persecuted church are available as videos and come with prayer points at the end to help you pray. They are updated every two months.

For all these resources – and more! – go to www.opendoorsuk.org and find out how you can connect with the courage and faith of your persecuted family in this season.



**Be the lifeline
to help secret
believers at risk in
North Africa know
they are not alone**

Islèm has to keep her faith secret from her father for fear of rejection and violence.

More and more people from a Muslim background are discovering the gospel online. Praise God, Islèm heard about Jesus through social media. But she can't be open about her faith. If her father knew, Islèm worries that he might kill her.

Secret believers are often isolated, and the threat of the coronavirus means they are more isolated than ever. Without online encouragement and training, their faith can falter or even die. But with your support, the underground church can encourage and disciple them.

"In the Bible, we are told that we need to be a united community," says Islèm. "We Christians should be one body."

Will you help reach secret believers like Islèm with the support they need?

EVERY £38 could provide digital training and discipleship for a young believer from a Muslim background

EVERY £70 could mean 35 people are reached by the church through social media.

To make your gift and pledge your support, return the enclosed envelope, phone **01993 460015** or visit **www.opendoorsuk.org**.