

ARISE AFRICA



Church under attack

REPORT ON THE SCOPE, DRIVERS, AND EFFECTS OF FAITH-RELATED VIOLENCE AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, AND SUGGESTED REMEDIES TO ENSURE A RESILIENT, RESOURCEFUL AND INFLUENTIAL CHURCH.

Executive Summary

Arise Africa is a multi-year campaign with the vision that the global community acknowledges and acts against the extreme violence targeted against Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa and supports the Church to persevere and be resilient, resourceful, and influential. The campaign brings together the AEA, Open Doors, and several other global and regional partners around this quest for lasting positive change.

WHAT TO KNOW

Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is at an all-time high. The context is complex and there are various drivers at work. But much of this violence is at the hand of extremist groups who may go by different names, but share an Islamic expansionist agenda.

The Central Sahel region of Sub-Saharan Africa now accounts for 51% of all deaths from terrorism and holds its epicentre. The Sahel is home to the world's fastest growing and most-deadly terrorist groups. Deaths caused by terrorism are now ten times higher than it was in 2019.

The Church finds herself in the firing line. At least 4,194 Christians were killed for their faith in SSA in 2024, while at least 3,369 were abducted (3,300 in Nigeria alone). At least 2,030 Christians were sexually violated for their faith and over 23 thousand Christian houses, properties and businesses have been destroyed for faith related reasons.

The circumstances the Church is contending with are rooted in certain external and internal **vulnerabilities**. Field experts say external vulnerabilities which contribute to the crisis and allow its longevity, include a lack of state protection, impunity and radical ideology that permeates societies. Internal vulnerabilities include Christian's general passiv-

ity, and failure to engage politically and a mostly weak view on advocacy. Additional vulnerabilities include a weak theology of suffering, and a general unpreparedness for persecution and advocacy. One **effect** the Church is dealing with is mass displacement. Arise Africa has conducted research in Nigeria, one of the countries where the church is hardest hit by the violence. A summary of the research report is included in this resource. It describes how Christians were the preferred target of extremists as evidences by the deliberately targeting of Christians and their communities, their livelihood, faith leaders and places of worship. Inadequate and poorly distributed resources, faith-based discrimination, and insufficient understanding of specific displacement experiences increased the vulnerabilities of Christians during displacement. Faith also increases the level of risk for displaced Christians who try to return home. The research further pointed out that there is often a very nuanced experience in displacement for women, children and youth and the older generation. Sometimes the nuances were specific and unique to Christian IDPs.

WHAT TO DO

The Church in SSA is raising a united voice against the targeted violence. During the 2023 regional launch of the Arise Africa campaign in Lomé, Togo, citizens of SSA nations discussed our shared experiences of inequality, religious discrimination, faith-based violence and persecution. We made a declaration to highlight the plight of Christians in SSA and seek effective ways of halting the spread of violence and religious extremism. Participants attending a symposium in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2024, added their voice to the

declaration.

The signatories call on the Church to strengthen its capacity for advancing the interests of the persecuted Church through:

- monitoring, documenting and reporting persecution and engage in advocacy
- strengthening and unifying the body of Christ in SSA through measures including holistic discipleship.

We also call on SSA Christians to support persecuted Christians in this region by:

- sensitizing themselves and their communities about the situation in SSA and the plight of Christians.
- making persecution of Christians a long-term agenda item for specific prayer and advocacy, as well as practical assistance through partnering in relevant activities
- being ready to advocate for Christians of SSA with their own government.

In this booklet we provide you the resources you need to break the silence over targeted violence and start the healing. We call on you to:

1. Be aware: This booklet contains summarized information on the spread, context, drivers and effects of the targeted violence. You can stay up to date with news affecting the persecuted Church in SSA via the *ServAfrica* website. By becoming a member you can access additional analyses, prayer information, and discussion on issues affecting the persecuted Church.

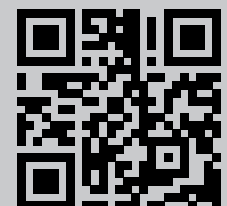
2. Prepare and Pray: There is urgent need for us to join in prayer for the affected Church. Prayer info will always be available on the *ServAfrica* community, and sharable resources will also be accessible in the members' area. But in addition to prayer, we also need to prepare Christians to respond in a God-honouring way when persecution comes. P18-20 provides an abbreviated Biblical view on suffering that can help us remain

strong amid the storm. Under the *ServAfrica* members' area there is also a link to discipleship content.

Sign the petition: With people all over the world, join your voice to the petition that will be presented to international government bodies and governments of individual countries to raise awareness and ask for action to stop the violence and start the healing. (We only ever share firsts name, the letter of your last name, and the country you live in).



3. Monitor, document, report, and advocate: Persecution happens on our doorstep. It is important to document violations of freedom of religion or belief in a way that can hold water in court). You can read more about this in the members' area of *ServAfrica*, and can reach out to us to participate in future workshops. With meticulously documenting violations, we also need to be equipped to advocate with people in authority. Our efforts can be more effective if we use human rights tools. In Christian circles we are often hesitant to use the term 'Human Rights', because it can be used in humanistic endeavours and there are some human rights principles that do not align to Christian values. But the basis of human equality is the fact that all were created equal by God. 'Human rights' describe how humans should be treated by the State, and how they should behave toward one another. This booklet contains introductory teaching on this, but more in-depth discussion can be accessed under our website and the members' area. In your hands is the key to ignite your journey to stop the violence and start the healing.



Violence at an all time high

Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is at an all-time high. The 2025 Global Terrorism Index states:

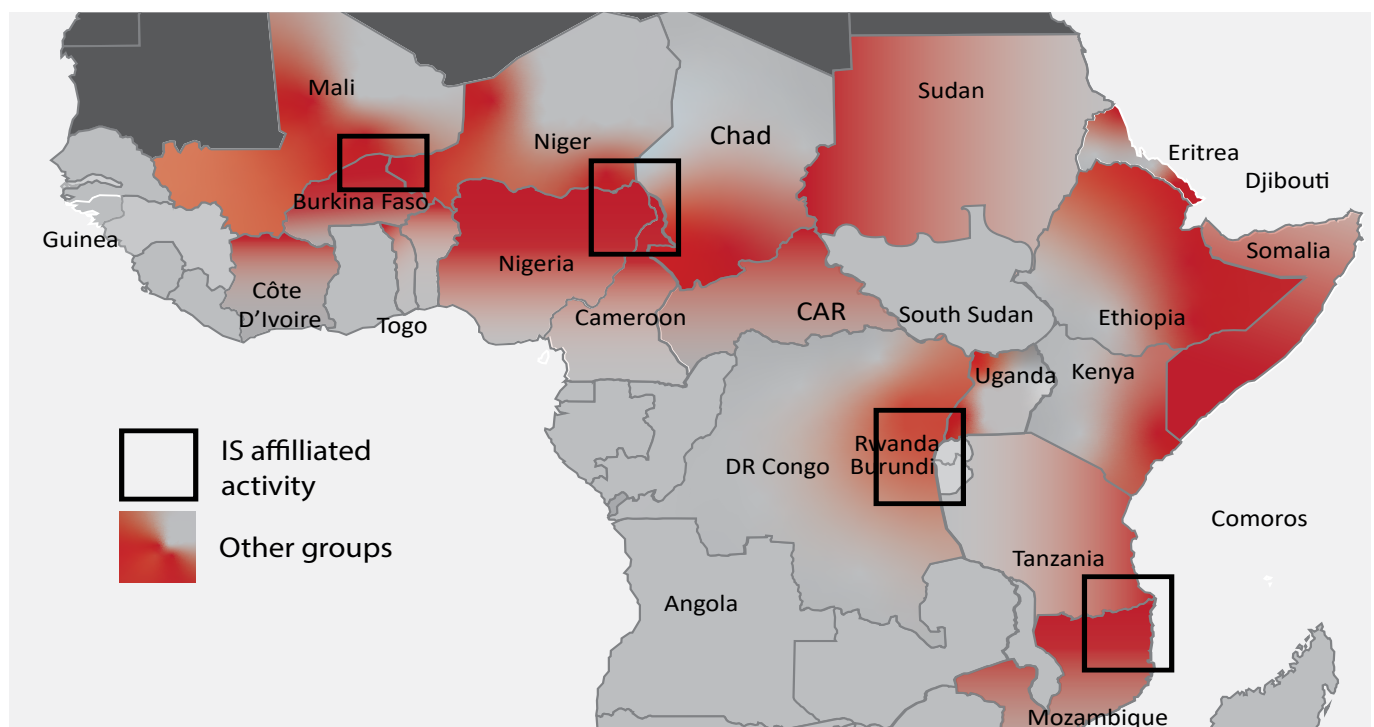
- The **Central Sahel** region of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) now accounts for 51% of all deaths from terrorism and has become the epicentre of terrorism. Deaths caused by terrorism have been ten times higher than in 2019.
- **Burkina Faso** suffered the worst impact from terrorism, with deaths increasing by 68% despite attacks decreasing by 17%.
- **The Sahel** is home to the world's fastest growing and most-deadly terrorist groups.
- **Islamic State (IS)** replaced the Taliban as the world's deadliest terror group in 2021, with 15 deaths per attack in Niger.

ISIS has formed regional centres like IS West Africa Province (active in the Lake Chad region), IS in the Greater Sahel (Active in the Liptako Gourma area) and IS Central African Province, active in DRC and Northern Mozambique. There are at least 35 conflicts in SSA.

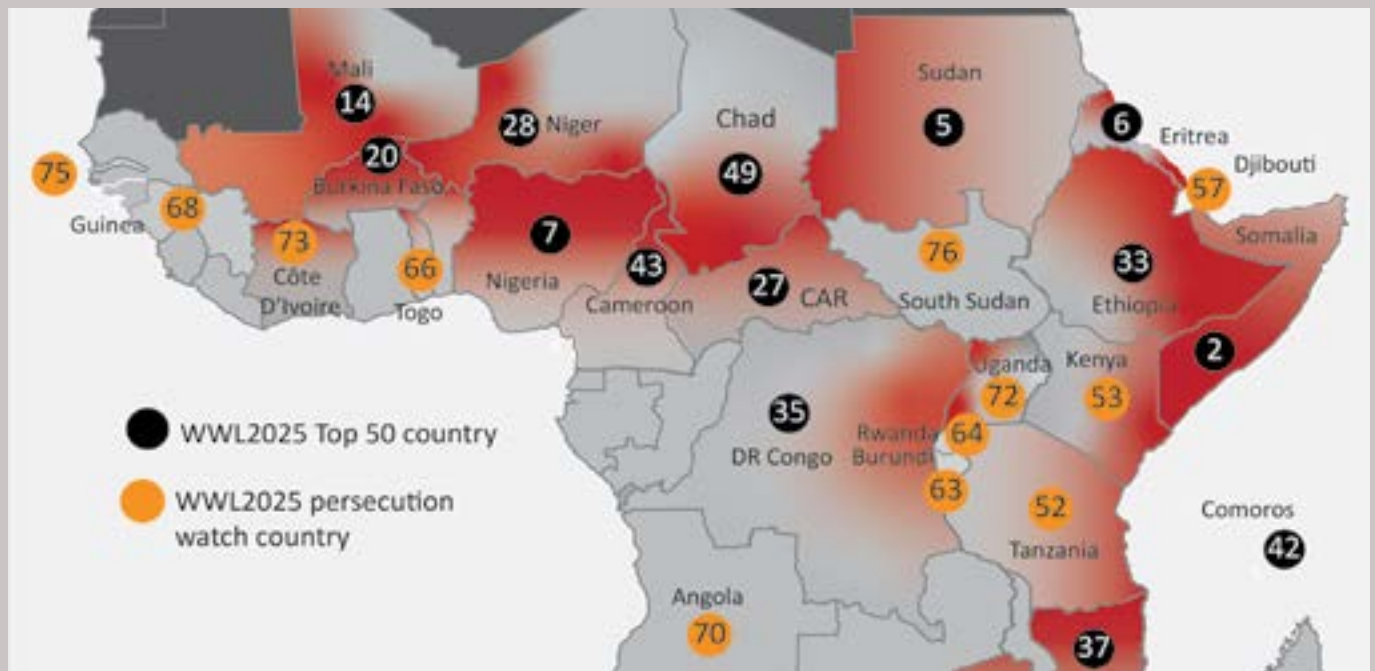
The German Institute for Global and Area Studies wrote in 2020:

“The current escalation of violent conflict has, without doubt, been triggered by the presence of jihadist groups...Pre-existing conflicts – particularly between pastoralist Fulani and agrarian communities – which had been peacefully managed for generations are now being manipulated by jihadists... This has resulted in instances of mass violence and a rapid erosion of community institutions. As the spiral of violence and retaliation escalates, governments are losing access to local communities while also facing growing levels of political discontent.”

As part of their violent expansionist agenda, these terror groups exploit social ills, like political instability, limited resources and perceived marginalization on the grounds of ethnicity, to gain ground. And their preferred targets are all who stand in their way, including the Church. ■



The Church is under siege



Fourteen countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are within the first 50 on Open Doors' 2025 World Watch List, an annual index of Christians persecution. Countries here are among the most violent for Christians, with Nigeria topping the list. Open Doors reports:

- At least 4,194 Christians were **killed** for their faith in SSA in 2024
- At least 3,369 Christians were **abducted** for faith related reasons
- At least 2,030 Christians were **sexually violated** for their faith in this region
- At least 23,508 Christian houses, **properties** and businesses have been destroyed due to their faith.

The violence is driving a overwhelming displacement crisis. There are nearly 35 million people internally displaced by violence and conflict in SSA, at least 16.2 million are Christians. And many of them are driven from their homes and off their land because of their faith in Jesus. This isn't just an accidental consequence—it's a deliberate

strategy clearly illustrated by mass abduction of Christians, and subsequent pressure to renounce their faith, as well as targeting of their spiritual overseers and places of worship. In many places across the region Christian communities are emptied and taken over by Islamic extremists.

While the drivers of violence are varied and complicated, the experienced consequences are very similar: Christian presence is eliminated. The displaced often face squalor in formal and informal displacement camps, facing lack of basics like food, water and sanitation, on top of ongoing threats from the jihadists. Nine out of the top 10 most neglected displacement crises are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Christians have told us they generally feel alone in their stance against violence. The broader Church, media, governments, and civil society (local, national, international) do not sufficiently acknowledge or act to stop the violence or its effects. ■

The church contends with external and internal vulnerabilities

External vulnerabilities

include a lack of state protection, impunity and radical ideology that permeates societies. As mentioned earlier, terrorist groups take advantage of weak states and poor governance to expand their vision. In many of affected communities, informal authority of religious leaders or pressure groups hold a lot of sway, especially in societies that have allowed sharia law to rule formally or informally. When such forces advocate for violence, mobs are often



A mosque stands in a remote area of Nigeria that has suffered repeated Boko Haram attacks.

ready and eager to respond.

And where there is a lack of rule of law, perpetrators can continue such lawless behaviour with impunity. And within the Islamic radical worldview of *Dar al Islam* Christian lives are expendable as they enforce adherence to radical Islamic interpretations. ▼



Women at a church service in Nigeria.

Church leaders and partners in the field told us that there are also **internal vulnerabilities** that should be seen as root causes, and these include Christian's general passivity and failure to engage politically and a mostly weak view on what the Bible says about suffering and speaking up about injustice through advocacy.

But what is also true, is the fact that the scale of the crisis outweighs the church's resources. In addition, they have identified a weak theology of suffering, and a general unpreparedness for persecution. ■

Devastating effect

The effects of this targeted violence against God's children have been devastating:

- **SPIRITUALLY**, many have not been discipled to expect persecution or respond in a Biblical way, and so are giving up the faith. We hear all too often of Christians who have gone back to traditional religions in the hope of supernatural protection.
- **EMOTIONALLY**, we witness worrying signs of persistent individual and collective trauma, anger and despondency.
- **PHYSICALLY**, Christian communities across this region deal with cycle upon cycle of

death, injury, loss, and long-term health issues related to the constant stress.

- **SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY**, the result is unmeasurable, as Christians face loss of property, loss of income, loss of access to education, displacement, poverty, and on the long term, social demise.

The impact on the overall health of the Church, and society at large, has been immense. Partners have told us that they fear the Church could simply be pushed out of strategic regions. ■

For the displaced there is

No Road Home

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH REPORT FROM NIGERIA

Nigeria has seen unprecedented, extremist violence against Christians that has resulted in mass displacement. In 2014, there were 1.1 million internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Nigeria. As of 2023, there were 3.4 million. In 2024, Arise Africa and several partners conducted research into the realities IDPs in Nigeria. We focused on the northern state of Borno, where Islamic militants thrive and target Christians, and Plateau state, where Fulani militant violence have uprooted Christian communities.

While the root causes of the violence are complex and Christians and non-Christians alike are impacted, our research revealed the specific vulnerabilities of displaced Christians. They have been singled out for violence, have faced harsh living conditions and experience faith-based challenges throughout their displacement journey.

DRIVERS OF DISPLACEMENT:

Targeted violence and a failure to protect Christian communities have resulted in mass internal displacement. Though violence has affected both Christians and non-Christians, recorded testimonies indicate that Boko Haram, Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), and militant Fulani groups have deliberately targeted Christians or Christian communities, their livelihood, faith leaders and places of worship.

Nigerian state security personnel regularly failed to respond in a timely or effective manner to violent attacks against Christians. This failure created distrust in the security forces among Christians.

Furthermore, widespread impunity for the perpetrators of violence encouraged an environment where more violence and greater displacement can and do take place.

EXPERIENCES IN DISPLACEMENT:

Inadequate and poorly distributed resources, faith-based discrimination, and insufficient understanding of specific displacement experiences increased the vulnerabilities of Christians during displacement. The limited resources available to IDPs through the United Nations, national and international actors, are concentrated in Northeast Nigeria; those displaced in the North-Central region have been largely ignored. Need far outpaces current funding commitments by international governments.

- In **Borno State**, religious identity determined whether Christian IDPs received support during their displacement. Christian IDPs held the local government and members of the public accountable for unfair treatment and faith-based discrimination, particularly in terms of access to shelter, humanitarian aid, education and employment. Additionally, respondents described how members of the local government and members of the public tried to pressure, coerce, or force conversion to Islam.
- In Christian-majority **Plateau State**, religious identity was not identified as a determining factor for support. Rather, the Nigerian government's reductive narrative describing the crisis as "clashes" and the failure of inter-



A woman prepares a meal in a displacement camp in northern Nigeria.

national agencies to recognize the scale of displacement, appears to have greatly inhibited national and international support for thousands of displaced people. The International Organization for Migration's (IOM) official numbers of IDPs in Plateau are nearly 80 percent lower than those reported by local communities.

RISK OF RETURN

Faith increases the level of risk for displaced Christians who try to return home. Christians, particularly in Borno state, reported it is relatively safer for Muslims to return to their homes as they have not been further targeted for their faith by Boko Haram or ISWAP. Christians in Borno also recounted that state officials pushed them to return involuntarily and left them to fend for themselves without adequate preparation, materials, or security protection.

Muslims and Christians both faced the threat of abduction, incl. upon return to their homes. However, militants targeted Christians and demanded higher ransom for a Christian than a Muslim, with the highest ransom demanded for Christian faith leaders. Where Boko Haram was

present, Christians reported an even higher threat level when trying to return home, as the militants often ignored Muslims or had their Muslim neighbours actively inform militants about Christians in the area. Consequent risks included extra fines, forced conversion, or even death.

IDPs from Christian communities in both Borno and Plateau also reported land grabbing, as attackers remain on the land belonging to the displaced. Their attackers, whether Boko Haram, ISWAP, or Fulani militants, are still an active threat for displaced Christians and their lands remain destroyed, occupied or unprotected by security forces.

VULNERABILITIES OF SPECIFIC GROUPS

Through interviews with women with children, youth and older generations, some specific vulnerabilities associated with age and sex emerged. Some were specific to Christian IDPs, and some appeared to be a risk for all IDPs incl. Christians.

Women and girls

- Pregnant women have faced inadequate food



Displaced mother and child

supplies and a lack of medical help. As a result, some babies have died during delivery or as newborns.

- Some young girls have reportedly been forced into “survival sex”, exchanging sex for basics such as food.
- Heightened risk of sexual violence.
- Female-headed households are prevalent. Women face the grief of losing their husbands, alongside the challenge of being the sole provider for their families.
- Hygiene challenges, such as sharing one toilet with multiple households and lack of access to sanitary supplies.
- In some places, such as Ngala Local Government Areas (LGA), female Christians have sometimes had to wear a hijab to gain acceptance in the community.

Children and youth

- Lack of education and training opportunities: sometimes there were no schools, sometimes the schools were closed, and in other situations the fees were too high. This increased the risk of exploitation for children and youth. Some faith-related discrimination in education settings was also reported, such as denying access to some courses to those with Christian names.
- Few employment options. For example, in Gwoza LGA, few can afford education and many only have farming skills.
- Child trafficking was reported in Mangu LGA, with orphans particularly at risk.

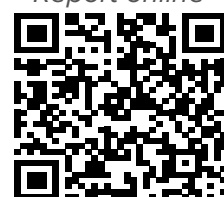
Older generations

- Find it physically challenging to queue for food and aid distribution.
- Lack of access to medical care.
- Reported significant psychological impact from being disconnected from their ancestral lands.

*“Our churches are shut down.
We are still in the situation.
Nobody can tell our story better
than us. We want the world to
know we are still not far from*

these problems.” - IDP from Gwoza LGA, Borno state. ■

Report online



Lomé Declaration

During the 2023 regional launch of the Arise Africa campaign in Lomé, Togo, citizens of Sub-Saharan African (SSA) nations discussed our shared experiences of inequality, religious discrimination, faith-based violence and persecution. We made a declaration to highlight the plight of Christians in SSA and seek effective ways of halting the spread of violence and religious extremism. Participants attending a symposium in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2024, added their voice to the declaration:

“ON THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS, WE ARE AGREED THAT:

1. **People of all faiths and none, should live together in peace** and harmony, a state of being that requires mutual respect and tolerance for others.
2. The degree of repression that Christians face varies between and within the countries of the SSA region. However, **the fundamental rights and freedoms of Christians are increasingly being violated**, and the most extreme form, involving violence, is making itself felt across SSA.
3. **Christians suffer in different ways.** They are being murdered, individually and en masse. They are abused. They are abducted. Women and girls are subjected to sexual violence including rape and enslavement. They are terrorised from their homes and farmlands causing humanitarian crises. In some areas, the influence of Christians is substantially reduced, and their one-time inhabitants live in displacement by the millions.
4. We have seen consistency in the way that **the right to have, hold, adopt or change belief and faith is not sufficiently respected** in our countries. In some parts of SSA, Christians are murdered. There is danger for many in publicly manifesting religious beliefs, whether individually or in groups.
5. The **downplaying** or outright denial of our experienced reality as Christians, which takes place at the national and international levels, **adds to our distress and frustration.**
6. The **impact of faith-based abuse on social cohesion** in our countries ranges from moderate to high, linked to the level of violence that is faced by communities.
7. The main sources of violence against Christians and their way of life are **extremist Islamist groups, families, and communities** unwilling to accept the religious conversion of their members to Christianity, and undesignated armed groups.



Participants at the 2025 Arise Africa Symposium add their signatures to the Lomé Declaration.

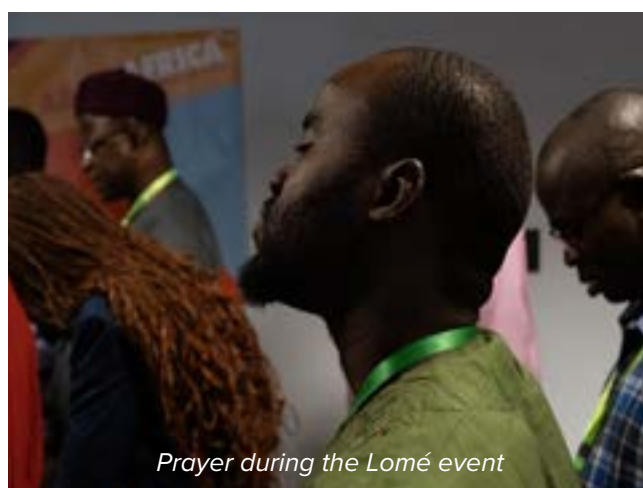
8. The main factors that **facilitate the growth of this violence** are divisions along ethnic and religious identities, socio-economic vulnerabilities, inadequate governmental responses, if any, political instability, poor law enforcement, and impunity.
9. We find the national and international **media's coverage** of violence against Christians in our countries to be **inadequate**, while in many countries it is poor.
10. The Church in SSA **feels alone and unheard**. We are concerned that the universal Church is insufficiently aware of the plight of persecuted Christians.
11. The Church in SSA is **insufficiently united** against persecution.”

THE SIGNATORIES CALL ON THE CHURCH IN SSA TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN STANDING UP FOR CHRISTIANS UNDER THREAT BY:

- a. Strengthening its capacity for advancing the interests of the persecuted Church through activities such as monitoring, documenting, reporting and advocacy.
- b. Working towards strengthening and unifying

the body of Christ in SSA through measures including holistic discipleship.

- c. We also call on SSA Christians to support persecuted Christians in this region by:
 - Sensitizing themselves and their communities about the situation in SSA and the plight of Christians.
 - Making persecution of Christians a long-term agenda item for specific prayer and advocacy, as well as practical assistance through partnering in relevant activities.
 - Be ready to advocate for the Christians of SSA with their own government. (See: What does the Bible say about the Church and Faith & Freedom). ■



Prayer during the Lomé event

Speak up for Faith & Freedom

The term 'human rights' as used in legal texts and the international system is modern, but the idea of human beings having entitlements/rights and those in power being obligated to respect them, is old. In Christian circles we are often hesitant to use the term 'Human Rights', because it can be used in humanistic endeavours and some human rights principles do not align to Christian values. But under the concept of human rights, all people have the same right to be treated as persons irrespective of their status or who they are. The basis of human equality is the fact that all were created equal by God. 'Human rights' describe how humans should be treated by the State, and how they should behave toward one another. In Christian terms, this is about respect and love which are central to Christianity. The World Council of Churches has rightly asserted that "international human rights law is an essential framework for the promotion, protection and practical recognition of the God-given human dignity of every human being". These rights do not exist in a vacuum – if there is a right, it must be capable of being enforced. The duty to respect human rights falls on the State (the government). **Using human rights tools or rights-based language to advocate for persecuted Christians, makes our engagement with government and people in authority more effective and efficient.**

BIBLICAL BASIS OF HUMAN RIGHTS, DIGNITY, AND EQUALITY & JUSTICE

Regardless of who we are or where we live, we all have universal, basic needs. When they are not met, our physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing suffers. 'Human rights' are essentially a set of norms governing how individuals and groups should be treated to ensure these needs are met – based on ethical principles regarding what society considers important to a decent life. Human Rights may appear to be legal, political and secular or removed from daily life – but they have biblical roots, are relevant to all our lives and are a useful tool that could make many people's/communities' lives better. The idea of human rights is founded on the key values of dignity, equality and justice – values that are prominent in

the Bible. They are rights that every human has by virtue of being human.

- i. **Dignity** is about a person's worth or value, that makes them deserving of respect. God is the source of human dignity. He created us in his image, and that defines our worth and value.
- ii. **Equality** is about treating everyone as equals. The Bible says we should not favour certain people or groups but treat everyone equally.
- iii. **Justice** is about treating people fairly. The Bible calls us to uphold justice – and human rights are a good tool to do this.

The world's governments have recognised their responsibility to respect and meet people's basic needs. That's why we have human rights agree- ➤



Participants of the 2024 Arise Africa listen attentively to a presentation

ments, laws and treaties, which place responsibilities on the State to respect, protect and fulfil the exercise of their citizens' human rights, and create the platform to ensure dignified treatment of human beings. Many of them closely reflect what the Bible says about dignity, equality and justice – and Christians have been influential in drafting them.

When people's human rights are violated and they are not treated with dignity based on who they are, it violates the image of God in them. For all these reasons we should see it as part of our Christian calling and spiritual duty to uphold and defend human rights. We can all play a role in building societies where human rights are respected and protected.

While we acknowledge that not all human rights are completely aligned with the Bible, Human Rights remain an important tool to defend the rights of Christians. Human rights values are rec-

ognized in some key Human Rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)

DIGNITY

Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:26-27

- a. Charter of the Organization of African Unity: "freedom, equality, justice and dignity are essential objectives for the achievement of the legitimate aspirations of the African peoples."

- b. Article 1 UDHR: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”
- c. Article 6 UDHR: “Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.”
- d. Article 5 ACHPR: “Every individual shall have the right to the respect of the dignity inherent in a human being and to the recognition of his legal status.”

EQUALITY

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts.” - James 2:1-4

Article 2 ACHPR: “Every individual shall be entitled to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognized and guaranteed in the present Charter without distinction of any kind such as race, ethnic group, color, sex, language, religion, political or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status.”

FREEDOM AND JUSTICE

Whoever says to the guilty, “You are innocent,” will be cursed by peoples and denounced by nations. But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come on them.” -

Proverbs 24:24-25

Article 2 ACHPR: “Every individual shall be entitled to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognized and guaranteed in the present Charter without distinction of any kind such as race, ethnic group, color, sex, language, religion, political or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status.”

FAITH AND FREEDOM

“Freedom of religion or belief” (FoRB) – which includes thought and conscience – is a human right that gives everyone the right to choose, change and practice a religion or belief of their choice (or none). It reflects the idea that everyone should be allowed to:

- a. decide for themselves what they think and believe
- b. belong to groups with shared beliefs and practices
- c. question ideas and practices, and change their minds
- d. express their ideas and identity through the way they live
- e. refuse to do things that violate their conscience.

We all express our thoughts, beliefs and sense of religious (or non-religious) identity in our day-to-day lives – in what we eat or don’t eat, wear or don’t wear, the rituals and celebrations we observe, the conversations we hold and how we engage with issues of concern in society. So it is an important and relevant right for every human being, whether they have a religious faith or not.

Faith and freedom in legal texts:

- a. ACHPR Article 8 (recognizes FoRB as a fun- ►

damental right): “Freedom to conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed. No one may, subject to law and order, be subjected to measures restricting the exercise of these freedoms.”

- b. UDHR Article 18: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”
- c. ICCPR Article 18: Widespread definition; recognizes right of every person to have, to adopt, or change a religion or belief of their choice; to practice and manifest it individually and collectively; not to be discriminated against or suffer coercion on the basis of religion or belief (equal protection of the law); and to provide for the religious and moral education of one’s children. Protects right of religious minorities to practice own religion in any State they reside.

What does FoRB protect?

Legal provisions around faith and freedom protect people/believers – not belief systems, religions or religious institutions. They do not protect people from feeling offended on behalf of their religion or belief. Criticizing religions or belief is not a violation of a person’s rights. They do (or should) protect individuals from discrimination and violations based on their religion or belief, even if they hold an atheist belief or have an interpretation of a religion that differs from the majority. However, there are limitations on ridiculing, incitement of public hostility, violence, hatred and discrimination against a religious belief or group.

Internal’ component of FoRB:

This is the right to think, believe, question and

change our beliefs. This is an absolute right – no person or government is allowed to restrict it. It also gives parents and guardians the right to teach their children in conformity with their own convictions, both moral and religious.

External’ component of FoRB:

This is the right to express one’s religion or belief, through worship, observance, practice, and teaching, in public or in private, either individually or in community with others. It includes a broad range of acts, such as the right to:

- a. come together in worship and celebrate festivals or days of rest.
- b. wear religious clothing or symbols or follow special diets.
- c. have places of worship or display religious symbols.
- d. appoint religious leaders and register religious institutions.
- e. teach and communicate on religious matters.

This aspect of FoRB can be limited. No one should use their rights and freedoms in a way that harms others. However, limitations should be a last resort and they must be established by law; directly related and proportionate; non-discriminatory; and necessary to protect public health, order, safety, morals or the rights and freedoms of others.

Eg: a law requiring a minimum number of members to register a denomination is not a legitimate limitation as there might be religious minorities unable to reach this threshold. It may result in restrictions on the right to manifest religious beliefs if only registered groups are allowed to gather for worship.

However, it could be dangerous to cram too many people into a place of worship – so it may be necessary for the authorities to limit the number of people allowed in a place of worship on the



Symposium attendees pose for a photo near a hedge shaped with the word “dignity”.

grounds of public safety.

FoRB violations:

Unfortunately – despite the laws that exist to protect human rights/the right to FoRB in particular – in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as many other places, the rights of Christians are being systematically violated. Examples include:

- a. extremist groups targeting Christians in violent attacks.
- b. increasingly stringent regulations governing religious groups and especially churches.
- c. discrimination against Christians in the distribution of humanitarian aid.
- d. forcing Christian children to receive a Muslim education.

Summary

We all have basic needs and want to live in societies where those needs are met. Human rights are rights that all humans should have, by virtue of being human. They are founded on the biblical values of dignity, equality and justice. All States are bound by laws and treaties on human rights, many of which reflect biblical principles – and Christians were influential in drafting them. ‘Freedom of religion or belief’ (FoRB) is a key human right that gives everyone the right to choose, change and practice a religion or belief of their choice (or none). It reflects the idea that everyone should be allowed to decide what they think and believe and to express their ideas and identity through how they live. We all express our thoughts, beliefs and sense of religious (or non-religious) identity in our day-to-day lives – so it’s a relevant right whether we have a religion or not. A violation of a person’s right to FoRB is a violation of their human rights – and of God’s image in them. Such violations are increasingly happening in sub-Saharan Africa. For all these reasons we should see it as part of our Christian calling and spiritual duty to uphold and defend FoRB and other human rights. ■

Stand strong in persecution

Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have experienced persecution and suffering. The global Body of Christ continues to experience various forms of persecution. According to Open Doors, “In 2025, more than 380 million Christians will face persecution and discrimination because of their faith in Christ”. For the twelfth consecutive year, there was an increase in persecution, driven by violence in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) and tighter church control in Central Asia.” John 15 helps us understand how to respond to such persecution.

God’s Kingdom reality

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth for his own glory and sovereign dominion. But the Fall introduced injustice, conflict, suffering, and death. Through the sin of the first Adam, humanity has fallen from glory. However, the last Adam, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, brought eternal redemption and restoration for all who believe in Him. Christ’s followers are called to display his character, which is only achieved through Biblical discipleship. A Christlike character proves that God’s light and righteousness are emerging in this world. Now, in addition to the general physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering because we live in a broken world, there is a Kingdom reality of persecution and suffering for righteousness’ sake. God’s mission throughout Church history is inseparable from such persecution.

The hatred against God and his people

John 15:18-19: ¹⁸ “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates

you”.

Because of their faith in and allegiance to Christ, his disciples may face the same hatred he experienced. “When we intentionally live according to the way of Christ, we can count on meeting opposition from those who hate Christ,” writes Tom Ascol¹. The emerging Kingdom and the broken world are in confrontation with one another. But praise be to God, there is victory in Christ. Many millions of people experience hardship and suffering, often without any hope or encouragement. But Christ’s followers can stand firm and endure persecution and suffering with hope – even through death – because our Master has conquered it all. In him and by him, we have inherited the faith that overcomes the world.

The privilege to be treated as the Master was treated

John 15:20-21: ²⁰ “Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’[b] If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they would obey yours also. ²¹ They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me”.

Jesus insisted that his disciples’ lives were distinguished from the world. And from the beginning he prepared them to face persecution as a result. His disciples obediently passed his teachings on to others, and this earned them the privilege of being treated as their Master was. But they could stand firm until death because he prepared them. Similarly, the Church in SSA must emphasize discipleship to Christ. It is the best way to equip Christians to be victorious in persecution. Knowing God and making him known to others is a way of strengthening Christ’s disciple to withstand persecution. Unfortunately, the prevalence of nom-



Christian women from Sudan study the Bible during a training

inalism and the prosperity gospel across Africa has produced church goers who cannot withstand persecution. Many backslide and compromise during persecution because they have not been biblically discipled. All believers should know that God's truth is worth the distress they faceⁱⁱ.

The guilt of perpetrators of persecution

John 15:22-25: ²² "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³ Whoever hates me hates my Father as well. ²⁴ If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. ²⁵ But this is to fulfil what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.'" God's Kingdom on earth, with the light, truth and justice embedded in Christ, is in a confrontation with the kingdom of darkness. Sin is fundamental-

ly a deliberate and intentional violation of God's will. Jesus made it clear that the authors of persecution are guilty of sin before God. But as Christ's disciples, our kingdom mindset should allow us to follow our Master's instruction to show them love and pray for them. That is our challenge to take up.

The work of the Holy Spirit

John 15:26-27: ²⁶ "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. ²⁷ And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning". In God's Kingdom we grow to spiritual maturity in Christ through discipleship and have access to advocacy. It is no longer by our own efforts we must face persecution, but rather by the power

of the Holy Spirit. Through his Spirit, Christ's true witnesses wisely proclaim the truth and present Christ to all mankind. Donald LeRoy Stults explains that persecution and suffering for Christ are important parts of our overall work to advance the Church in every part of the worldⁱⁱⁱ. From this view, the testimony of Christ requires God's enablement through the Holy Spirit in persecution and suffering. According to this biblical theology of persecution and suffering, the Triune God is fully active in achieving God's goal even through all kinds of mistreatments. The knowledge that God is with us, moreover, that we are becoming like Him amid persecution, is the source of our victory whatever be the cost of discipleship. God's promises of his presence and action become the source of inward boldness, strong faith, persevering hope and sustainable resilience. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit confronts those who are rebellious against God, convicting them of sin, righteousness and judgment. (See the story of Paul of Tarsus.)

Conclusion

John 15 provides teaching on biblical discipleship, persecution and suffering. They are part of

this broken world but also an important aspect of God's mission to bring redemption to all mankind, and raise followers. Becoming like Christ will bring the same hatred manifested by Satan and his victims against our Lord, but abiding in Christ is far more valuable than anything that can be lost in persecution. Therefore, the problem is not the occurrence of suffering and persecution, but rather poorly established faith and immaturity in Christ. Since persecution and suffering are attached to God's mission, we must make disciples according to the biblical model in which we emphasize our new birth in Christ, our resurrection life, and our unique faith that overcomes the world. Allegiance to Christ and obeying God in all circumstances is the best response a disciple can have to persecution, suffering, and even death.

- Théoneste Hitimana, Program Support & Learning Specialist, Central Africa.

ⁱTom Ascol (sd). What Is Christian Persecution? <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/what-christian-persecution>

ⁱⁱ Chee-Chiew Lee (sd.). When Christians Face Persecution: Theological Perspectives from the New Testament. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/when-christians-face-persecution/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Stults D. L. (2021). Looking at persecution and suffering theologically. Initial thoughts. In "International Journal for Religious Freedom". Vol 14:1/2.

ARISE AFRICA CALL TO ACTION

This booklet contains the resources you need to break the silence over targeted violence and start the healing. Your steps:

1. Be aware: Stay up to date on news affected the persecuted Church in SSA via the *ServAfrica* website. Become a member and access additional analyses, prayer information and discussion on issues affecting the persecuted Church.

2. Prepare and Pray - Access prayer info on the *ServAfrica* community, and sharable resources in the members' area. But help prepare Christians to respond in a God-honouring way to persecution. To help, access the discipleship materials

under the ServAfrica members' area. Also [sign the petition](#) that will be presented to international government bodies and governments of individual countries to raise awareness and ask for action to stop the violence and start the healing.

3. Monitor, document, report and advocate. Access teaching on how to document violations of freedom of religion or belief in the members' area of *ServAfrica*, and reach out to us to participate in future workshops.

Keep persecution of Christians on the agenda of the Church in SSA.