

IDOP 2016

REMEMBERING 20 YEARS

IDOP Twenty Years on

John Langlois

This year we look back on twenty years since we set up the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. We set up IDOP because there was a great need of prayer for the increasing persecution being suffered at the time by our brothers and sisters in Christ. Now is a good time to look back to consider what has been achieved. The fact is that persecution is far worse now than it was twenty years ago. From a human perspective we have achieved nothing. Hasn't God heard the millions of prayers we have offered to Him, let alone answered them?

From God's perspective it looks very different. In spite of (and perhaps because of) the persecution that has been suffered the Kingdom of God has advanced in ways we could not have imagined twenty years ago. At that time the Islamic Revolution in Iran was ravaging the church. Bishop Haik and others had been murdered for their faith. There were about 500 Iranians from a Muslim background in the country. It was depressing, but still the Christians continued witnessing. Today there are at least 100,000 Muslims in Iran who have come to faith in Christ. The Iranian government has admitted that there are too many to jail (read "Too Many to Jail, the Story of Iran's New Christians" by Mark Bradley). The same is true of other countries too.

So why the difference between the human and the divine perspective? The Bible gives the answer. Paul wrote to Timothy "All who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). Not "some" but "all". Persecution is the norm for Christians who are witnessing and living exemplary lives. The persecuted are not "them" but "us". If we are faithful witnesses the Kingdom of God will expand into Satan's territory and he will persecute us until we stop. All of us. In the West Christians are being persecuted for being faithful to the exclusiveness of marriage between a man and a woman. In this week of prayer let us all pray for the whole family of God all over the world. We all face different forms of persecution, but it is all from the same evil prince of this world.

"In our prayers we almost exclusively pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being persecuted. That is good, but when He was on earth Jesus expressly exhorted us to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you": Mat 5:44. When he was being stoned the first martyr, Stephen, did just that. He fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them": Acts 7:60. Stephen was following the example of Jesus who said at his crucifixion "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:24. Stephen's prayer was heard by a young man who was standing by looking after the coats of those doing the stoning (Acts 7:58). That man was Saul, who became the most notorious prosecutor of all. Stephen would probably have had no idea that his prayer would result in the conversion on the Damascus road of a persecutor who God would use to spread his gospel. It is recorded that in 1536 William Tyndale's final words spoken "at the stake with a fervent zeal, and a loud voice", were "Lord! Open the King of England's eyes." Two years later King Henry VIII's eyes were opened and he ordered that a copy of Tyndale's Bible be placed in every parish church in England. We should not ignore what Jesus told us to do, we need to pray for our persecutors that God will open their eyes."

Some of us in the West can be complacent when we hear of the persecution of our Christian brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world. We should remind ourselves that our present freedoms have been won at huge cost and we and our ancestors have not always had clean hands. This was brought home to be forcibly some weeks ago when I read the story of Denis Le Vair, a resident of Geneva, from where he travelled to France and the Channel Islands (where I live) to distribute Bibles. In 1554 he fled the islands to go back to Geneva. He was caught carrying Bibles and arrested by the king's delegate, John Langlois, a namesake of mine, and was burnt at the stake on 9 August 1554. It caused me to think very deeply.

We honour all those who have suffered in the past twenty years. Our prayers continue to be with you. May God give you the daily strength to be faithful to Him – faithful even until death and God will reward you with a crown of life (Rev. 2:10).

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20 Years of Asking for and Watching God's Initiative

Thomas Schirrmacher

A Chinese government official once told me, a German, that China fears being prayed out of office, just as it happened in East Germany at the end of the Soviet empire! Yes, prayer and peaceful actions in many churches played a major role in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain. But too many Christians relaxed after 1990, thinking that the age of persecution of Christians was over. They had overlooked the worsening situations in large countries like Iran and Pakistan, forgotten that China was still standing, and ignored the fact that not only atheists but also fundamentalist wings of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism were continuing to discriminate against and persecute Christians and others. Finally, albeit belatedly, the religious freedom specialists at the World Evangelical Alliance decided to get back to prayer for suffering Christians on the largest possible scale. One Sunday a year for the persecuted church—that should be possible for every local congregation!

Even though far too many churches and Christians still never think about their suffering sisters and brothers in Christ, thousands and thousands of churches have started to pray once a year. What was the result? I see three fruits of 20 years of IDOP.

1. To suffer with the suffering no longer is something just for specialised agencies or special-interest groups in congregations. More and more, it has become an ongoing interest for every Christian, just as it should be according to the New Testament. IDOP, perhaps more than any other initiative, has raised awareness that persecution is not a rare or local thing that happens from time to time, here and there, but a permanent companion that accompanies preaching the gospel, planting churches and helping the needy.

2. IDOP had a uniting effect. When people are suffering or even dying for Christ, it is not the time to discuss our differences. When united in prayer, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and other Christians from even beyond our circles realised that we all live and die for the same Saviour. Meanwhile the “ecumenism of the martyrs” has become an important theme that corrects any ecumenism that tends to be built on the lowest common denominator.

3. IDOP has had notable political fruit and influence. The German Evangelical Alliance started a German version of IDOP from the very beginning and placed the event on the church calendar of Germany. Some days before the first IDOP was held, the largest German newspaper quoted me on its cover. The reaction in the political world was immense. Not long afterwards, our federal parliament discussed the persecution of Christians. We had planned to pray, but God had planned much more.

I remember Christian members of the South African parliament visiting me in the German federal parliament to find out what we had done to get a large group of parliamentarians

meeting every week around the topic of persecution, debates on religious persecution taking place in the parliament and the government incorporating the fight for the religious freedom of Christian minorities into its coalition treaties. My immediate reaction was to say, "We started IDOP." Yes, of course, many Christians became active in politics, media and churches. But the effect was far beyond what we did. 2 Chronicles 7:14 says, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." This is our only real hope.

But there is an even broader political aspect. IDOP has become the largest regular religious freedom event held worldwide. Beyond praying for Christians, IDOP has highlighted the plight of people who belong to other religious groups and of adherents to non-religious worldviews in countries of concern. It has done more to make this situation known to millions around the world than has any other tool. So even though it is a Christian worship service, the effect has been positive for many other people of good will as well. Several governments have taken up the topic of religious freedom for all after years of IDOP in their country, as they know that the topic will not go away but will come up regularly, again and again.

We are like Esther, who was willing to offer her life on behalf of the endangered people of God. She organised the people of God to pray, but then God chose to change the situation by himself: "In that night the king could not sleep" (Esther 6:1). God changed everything, without Esther or anyone else, in one night. But after that, Esther was needed again: she went back to the king, told the missing part of the story and helped to save God's people. God can change everything without us; we cannot change anything without God. But God wants us to ask him, and then, when he changes things, he makes us a part of his initiatives.

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In the modern church calendar, the first two Sundays of November is set apart to remember and pray for the persecuted church, through the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP).

Organised by the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, the IDOP is a time set apart for us to remember thousands of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who suffer persecution, simply because they confess Jesus Christ as Lord.