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WWL 2015 Trends

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In this reporting period, persecution increased around the world, even in places where it has not been so marked in the past, such as parts of Asia, Latin America, and especially sub-Saharan Africa. However, as Li Tien En, a famous house church Christian in China used to say, “Persecution is two parts opportunity, one part crisis – God always brings opportunities out of a crisis.” There is a new unity occurring among ancient communities of faith, and we may see again that an exodus is not always bad for the spread of the Gospel.

There are three types of trend worth paying attention to. First, current trends that are highlighted in the WWL reporting period itself and are clear from the data gathered. Second, trends that are longer term and are hinted at but do not always emerge in stark relief in a single year, yet may be more vital over time. Third, there are good news trends that often get buried under the gruesome headlines, of which there has been a surfeit this year, and should be remembered.

We round up all three for your prayers and action, the last two more briefly.

1. Current trends: more persecution in more regions

- **The most rapidly growing area of persecution in the WWL is in the countries of Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa.**

Islamic extremism is the main source, but this extremism is not only from the violent jihadists like Boko Haram, but Islamists who seek to take over cultures by stealth. Twelve countries on the WWL had a significant points increase (6 points or more), and of that number eight were from Africa. The highest riser on the WWL is Kenya, up to #19 from #43, reflecting the only country that had a points increase of 15. For the third time in a row then, an African country has been the highest riser, following Mali in the 2013 list and CAR in the 2014 list. Second highest was Djibouti, with a points increase of 14, up to #24 from #46. Scoring over nine points was Tanzania, up to #33 from #49; Somalia, staying at #2, and over seven points was Comoros, up to #32 from #42. Sudan, Eritrea and Nigeria all had significant jumps in points also, with Sudan and Eritrea both re-entering the top 10 (#6 from #11 and #9 from #12), and Nigeria entering the top 10 for the first time in the WWL’s history (#10 from #14). It is fair to say that Islamic Extremism has two global centres of gravity. One in the Arab Middle East, but the other is in sub-Saharan Africa, and even Christian majority states are experiencing unprecedented levels of exclusion, discrimination and even violence. Many other countries in this region are boiling below the top 50 also, and may feature in the future.

- **Worldwide levels of persecution have risen, but this has not been primarily due to increased violence, but increased cultural marginalisation.**

The average increase in points for the WWL 2015 is 3, and to get into the Top 50 the points total is now much higher 48.5 (WWL 2014, 44.7). But the increased scores have mainly come in the five spheres of life through which we track the more subtle “squeeze” dimensions of persecution - private, family, community, church and national life. We do have a category that also measures violence, but in most countries the violence level has stayed largely the same (though of course, often dreadfully high in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Nigeria). Violence always rates the greatest headlines, but often the experience of family exclusion, or the loss of a job, or even rejection from a church community, is more devastating to a Christian and especially to a new convert. We can say that in most of the top fifty countries, daily life for the Christian is getting harder and harder.

- **Asia is getting harder again.**

It used to be that in the Far East especially, with the startling exception of North Korea, there was a noted improvement in conditions for Christians. However, this is reversing again. There are twelve countries from East Asia and the Far East in the Top 50, and with the exceptions of Laos and Sri Lanka, all have increased their points, and in the case of China, India and Malaysia, considerably. There are four Asian countries in the top twenty. North Korea remains #1, Afghanistan remains at #5, Pakistan at #8 and Vietnam rises to #16. India is the highest it has ever been on the WWL, at #21, Myanmar and Brunei both fall in the rankings though they have both had a slight rise in their scores, and China returns to the top thirty at #29. Malaysia has risen to #37 and Indonesia stays at #47. Many of these countries contain massive Christian churches. It is often been said that there are more people in church on a Sunday in China than in the whole of Europe. Governments often tend to be the main source of persecution in these regions, and they have become more worried about the dangers of religious extremism in the light of events in the Middle East. But there are also leaders of religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism who feel threatened by the Christian growth, and the big surprise of the year has been how much harder it has got for Malaysian Christians.

- **Latin America is back on the radar.**

Mexico is the highest entrant on the WWL this year at #38, and although Colombia has fallen from #25 to #35, its points loss is quite small. Other Latin American countries such as Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela remain causes for concern and may well enter a future top 50. The sources of persecution are complex and the most numerous in this most Christianized region, and Christians are caught in the crossfire between ‘Organized corruption’, ‘Tribal antagonism’, ‘Dictatorial paranoia’, and even rising ‘Secular intolerance’. Weak states allow local forces, such as narco-trafficking groups, to hold sway, and when Christians stand up and stand out they are targeted with merciless violence.

- **Islamic extremism is by far the most numerous persecution engine.**

No less than 18 of the top 20 countries have ‘Islamic extremism’ as a primary persecution engine. And this is also the case for forty of the top 50 countries. This reflects the trend that Christianity’s most global persecutor is Islamic extremism, and not only of a violent kind. It is not merely concentrated in the Middle East (including Arabian Peninsula), since only six of the top twenty are from that region. However, it is also an engine that joins onto other engines, most commonly ‘Tribal antagonism’, ‘Dictatorial paranoia’ and ‘Organized corruption’. The second most numerous primary persecution engine is Dictatorial Paranoia, where leaders seek to control religious expression. It is the primary source of persecution in thirteen countries, including North Korea, and shows up as a secondary engine in nine more

countries. Although Organized corruption is the prime persecuting engine in only two countries (Colombia and Mexico), it is the second most numerous (after Islamic extremism) when its status as a secondary engine is taken into account, showing up 23 more times in the WWL top 50. Christians increasingly have to pay a heavy economic price to remain faithful to Christ.

- **Under the influence of Islamic State radical sentiments have increased in the Middle East region.**

IS cells (either sleeping or awake) are present in several countries, e.g. Jordan, Lebanon, West Bank and Gaza. This has led to increased levels of fear for local Christians (and also local non-Christians, who in some cases have started to arm themselves). In Syria, areas under IS or other jihadist control have radicalized. Former 'moderate' Muslims have become stricter as they do not want to give the impression they are heretics. This has clear implications for the situation of Christians (the pressure on them has increased). This is true for all Christians but especially Christians from a Muslim background.

2. Long term trends

- **What will happen in Asia and relatively liberal countries in the Middle East when the jihadis return?** Asian states and Middle Eastern countries like Jordan are bracing for the return of the jihadis who went to fight for IS. Many of them are battle hardened, and smart in organizing. They may also bring a new hatred of Christians into a region that traditionally has been more accepting.
- **Splitting states as 'Secular intolerance' is seen as an antidote to religious extremism.** States are splitting apart into those who espouse religious extremism, and those who feel the only adequate riposte is to become more robustly secular. There is a danger of splitting societies into believers and non-believers, whatever the religious background, instead of extremists and moderates.
- **Corruption is increasingly an intensifying factor in persecution.** Failed states are still significantly to the fore, and in the vacuum all sorts of rackets are run, with the result that Christians often find the only way to function in society is to join in some sort of economic exploitation racket. It can make the difference between having to flee or stay.
- **The season of impunity for anti-Christian action in India has started.** The world's largest democracy elected a Hindu extremist Prime Minister, who has declared open season on Christians before. It has not taken long for the cabinet to begin to signal that non-Hindus should keep their heads down. A church in Delhi has already been burned.
- **Never before have so many violent extremists been seen by so many as heroes.** The violent jihadists of the Middle East, and IS in particular, are the first extremists to be savvy with social media. Their global appeal is hard to stop, with a number of young people in Western and Asian societies enthralled with their bloodthirsty exploits. You might have to expect more violence on the street corner... where you live.

3. Good news trends

- **Ancient enmities between Christians in the Middle East are slowly dissolving in the white heat of violence and persecution.** Symbolically it was obvious, as Pope Francis visited the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the end of November in Istanbul, and pledged amidst expressing grave concern about the persecution of Christians in the region to begin to reconcile the two communions and undo a split that goes back to AD1054. But in fact, on the ground, especially in Syria, the historic faiths and the newer denominations have drawn together in a remarkable new unity under the onslaught. There has never been so much unity among significant sections of the Middle East's Christians.
- **New co-operative relationships are being forged between Muslim and Christian in the Middle East caldron that could have wonderful long term benefits.** Although the headlines are on the dreadful violence and beheadings, yet in many localities Christians and Muslims have been thrown together in their need, and are forging a new respect as they work together and help each other. Some commentators have even gone so far as to say, "Muslim leaders have become so shaken by the actions of IS that they are seeking to work with the Christians and not ignoring them, and a new understanding of Christian-Muslim relations is being born."
- **China is still undecided about how to deal with the church.** This is actually good news. With the attacks on scores of churches, with some buildings being destroyed and about 300 crosses being removed, in the heartland of Wenzhou, many assume that China is setting its face against Christianity, but there is a surprising weight of counter-evidence that suggests a vigorous debate is going on in the Chinese government over whether it should restrict or free the church. If Christianity can sound, look and be Chinese enough, we might just see the church continuing to be invited to play a fuller role in the building of the new China. All this being said, it is the Tibetan and Muslim Uyghur Christian converts that bear the brunt of persecution in China.
- **Western government are engaging with religious communities in working against extremists like never before.** This may be due to simple fear of the so-called "facebook jihadists," where a young Western Muslim decides to act violently in their own country in response to the bloodthirsty calls of the IS bloggers and returnees, as the Brussels attack showed in 2014. But there is in many government departments (though not all) a new sophistication in realizing that good religion has the best chance of driving out bad religion. At the very least, there is a new openness and thirst for the information and wisdom of Christians working in these regions among those who are tasked with ensuring national security. That has not happened before to the extent it has in 2014.