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The Evangelical Fellowship
of Canada

**THE OVERLOOKED DEMOGRAPHIC:
A Report on the Impact of Religious Persecution on
Children
February 2012**

**Religious Liberty Commission
The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada**
1810-130 Albert Street
Ottawa, ON K1P 5G4
(613) 233-9868 Fax (613) 233-0301
www.evangelicalfellowship.ca

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1. *Introduction*

Religious persecution affects persons of all ages, but how this form of oppression impacts children in particular is a subject that has not received adequate consideration by the church, government, or others in the international community.

In situations where citizens suffer for their faith, children share many of the same trials that adults experience. They also endure unique trials specific to their stage of growth and development, social situations, and inherent vulnerability. More often than not, their ordeals go unacknowledged. In 2005, Amnesty International noted that, children “suffer in silence, their stories never told, their torments never called into account.”¹

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public life reports that 70 percent of the world’s 6.8 billion people presently live in countries where religious freedom is highly restricted.² Children 18 and under, who presently constitute more than 2.2 billion of the world’s population, are heavily represented in these regions as most nations with high restrictions on religious freedom also contain high populations of children.³ It is imperative that the well-being of children be taken into account and their rights protected in situations where religious freedom is limited or non-existent. This report is intended to highlight the situation, open up the discussion and contribute to the process of considering the best interests of children.

¹ Quoted in *Torture in the Age of Fear* by Ezat Mossallanejed. (Hamilton, ON: Seraphim Editions, 2005), 69.

² Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Global Restrictions on Religion,” 2009, p. 1. Available online: <http://pewforum.org/newassets/images/reports/restrictions/restrictionsfullreport.pdf>.

³ UNICEF, “State of the World’s Children 2011: Adolescence – An Age of Opportunity,” (2009). Available online: http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_57468.html, accessed February 28, 2012.

2. *Direct attacks on children*

In several nations, children are the direct and intended targets of religious persecution because of their own faith, presumption based on their parents' faith, or because they live in a neighbourhood or community that is identified with a particular faith. Direct persecution of these children takes a variety of forms, including imprisonment, torture, murder, and kidnappings.

Egypt, 2011

Seventeen-year old Ayman Nabil Labib was murdered following a classroom altercation in Mallawi, Minya province, on October 16. Although Egyptian media reported the incident as non-sectarian, his parents reported that their son was murdered "in cold blood because he refused to take off his crucifix as ordered by his Muslim teacher." Ayman also had a cross tattooed on his wrist, as per the Coptic tradition, as well as another cross which he wore under his clothes. According to witnesses, he was told to cover up his cross tattoo, but refused and defiantly exposed the second cross he wore under his shirt.

While official sources reported that Ayman was beaten up in the school yard, in reality he was severely beaten in the classroom in the presence of the teacher, who allegedly attempted to choke him. Ayman was then followed as he fled to the washroom, where the attack continued. He was still breathing when a supervisor took him to his room, but was dead an hour later when an ambulance transported his body.⁴

a) ***Torture and violence***

- In Nigeria, clashes between Christian and Muslim communities have resulted in deaths of as many as 12,000 people, including substantial numbers of children, since 1999 when Shari'a law was implemented in several states. Most recently, in 2010, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reported that 500

⁴ Voice of the Martyrs, "Coptic Student Murdered by Classmates for Wearing Cross" Available online: <http://www.persecution.net/eg-2011-11-10.htm>, accessed February 28, 2012.

persons in a Christian village near Jos “were hacked to death with machetes and then dumped into wells.” Children were among them.⁵

- In Burma, the military junta that rules the state – the State, Peace and Development Council (SPDC) – severely represses religious freedom and perpetrates other human rights abuses against those belonging to religious minority groups, including forced conscription into labour camps.⁶ Christian children, and children from other minority groups, have been abducted, raped and murdered, as well as forcibly recruited into the military.⁷
- In North Korea, the government regularly imprisons religious believers, regardless of age. It was recently estimated that there are 6,000 Christians incarcerated in “Prison No. 15” in the north of the country, and that there could be as many as 40,000 religious prisoners altogether in the nation, including children. It has been documented that North Korean authorities have incarcerated the children and even grandchildren of anyone caught praying.⁸ Former inmates and guards report that religious prisoners are treated more poorly than other prisoners. They are given the most treacherous assignments in the labour camps and receive the most abuse from prison authorities. There are also reports of infanticide in the prison camps.⁹

⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: May 2010,” 2010, p. 1. Available online:

<http://www.uscirf.gov/images/annual%20report%202010.pdf>. [USCIRF Annual Report 2010]

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷ The Christian Post, “Burmese Army Oppresses Chin Christians, Study Says”, 21 January, 2011. Available online: <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20110121/burmese-army-oppresses-chin-christians-study-says>, accessed February 28, 2016.

⁸ USCIRF Annual Report 2010, *supra* note 5, p. 42.

⁹ USCIRF Annual Report 2010, *supra* note 5, p. 42.

- In Uzbekistan, the government severely restricts religious activity and has criminalized unregistered religious groups.¹⁰ Those who practice their faith without the official approval of the government, including Christian children, are frequently imprisoned. According to the USCIRF, reliable reports as recent as 2010 confirm that torture is used to force both adults and children to renounce their beliefs. This includes physical violence, rape, and the use of “gas masks” to suffocate prisoners.¹¹ In January 2009, Uzbek authorities in Karshi threatened children and their parents because of their attendance at worship services. Several teachers asserted that Uzbek children “are not permitted to attend mosque.” The Deputy *Hokim* (governor) of Namangan region reportedly said that “school-age children should not attend religious meetings at all.”¹²

Somalia, 2010

In 2010, Nurta Mohamed, a 17-year-old girl in Somalia, was shot to death as a result of her conversion to Christianity. Before this, Nurta had fled her home in Bardher, Gedo Region after her parents tortured her for rejecting Islam. This torture included severe beatings, forced medication, and being shackled to a tree numerous times. Nurta’s parents also confined her to her home. Nurta’s death was described as an “honor killing” and occurred near her place of refuge in Galgadud Region.¹³

India, 2008

Nine-year-old Bikash is from Orissa – a region of India where a recent rise in militant Hinduism has resulted in severe persecution of Christians. Bikash experienced this persecution when one day, 20 people showed up at Bikash’s home and threatened his parents to leave Christianity or face death. His father refused to renounce his faith and was severely beaten. The perpetrators left, but not without uttering death threats to the family. Bikash and his parents left their family home and moved into the mountains close to their village. The next day their home was ransacked and burned.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid., 172.

¹¹ Ibid., 176.

¹² Ibid., 177.

¹³ Voice of the Martyrs. “Muslims Kill Christian Women and Children,” July 15, 2010. Available online: <http://www.persecution.net/pk-2010-07-15.htm>, accessed February 28, 2012.

¹⁴ Cheryl Odden, “Facing Death, Yet More than Conquerors,” *Voice of the Martyrs Canada Newsletter*, March 2011, 4.

Nigeria, 2002

Eight-year-old Nankpaqk from Nigeria experienced an attack on his village in Plateau State by Muslim militants. He recounts his experience:

“When the riots started it was a Friday and my dad was not at home. He rushed home that evening and told us to run away. When we were on our way out, we ran into the rioters. They told us to go ahead of them, and all of a sudden there were gun shots, and I was shot in my back.”

As he lay on the ground, Nankpaqk’s mother told him to stay down. She then tried to escape to get help. In the meantime, one of the attackers struck Nankpaqk with a machete on his shoulder. He passed out from the pain.

When he regained consciousness the attackers were gone. He went to look for his family. What he found was horrible. “I saw my younger brother shot dead,” he recounts. “I saw my younger sister dead; she was shot too. A few meters away from that place I saw my mother’s corpse on the ground, beheaded.”

Despite his shock, Nankpaqk knew that he didn’t have time to cry for his murdered family members; he needed to keep moving if he were able to survive. Thankfully, he was able to get to a neighbouring village for safety. It was then that the enormity of his loss struck him. He learned that his father, a local pastor, had also been tortured and killed by the Muslims during the attack on his village. “I felt really bad,” he said. “I was just crying. I felt they had killed me too alongside my family members. Being alone kept bringing back the memories of those who were dead.”¹⁵

b) Kidnappings

In some more extreme Muslim dominated states or regions, Christian children and youth are especially targeted. Christian girls have been kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and then forcibly married to Muslim men who are, most often, significantly older than them.

Pakistan, 2008

Parveen is a 13-year-old girl who lives in Pakistan. She is a Christian and goes to a Christian boarding school in a large city. A few summers ago, Parveen was walking to her grandmother’s house when some girls in a car stopped to ask her for directions. Parveen gave them directions and the girls offered her two apples and a ride close to her destination in return. Parveen ate the apples and

¹⁵ *Voice of the Martyrs Canada Newsletter*, “My Faith Was Never Shaken: The Testimony of Nankpaqk Kumzwam,” April 2008, 13.

accepted the offer. Moments later she passed out in the car. The apples were presumably laced with drugs.

Parveen woke up in a strange house and was told by the mother of the girls in the car that she was now a Muslim and would marry her 35-year-old son. Thankfully, in this situation, Parveen's relatives found out her whereabouts and rescued her before the family could carry out the marriage.¹⁶

Pakistan, 2010

In the Punjab province of Pakistan, a 12-year-old Christian girl, Huma was abducted, forced to convert to Islam and marry a 37-year-old Muslim. Her mother, Sajida Masih, took her daughter's case to court but the courts have refused to intervene, claiming that they are powerless to help now that Huma is Muslim. Police and officials have also been reluctant to assist Masih, citing the same reason. The kidnapper and his family have since disappeared, Huma along with them.¹⁷

c) ***Persecution at school***

Some children who come from Christian families are persecuted in their schools and social circles. They have been singled out by teachers, bullied by neighbours, and rejected or tormented by their peers.

Sri Lanka, 2005

15-year-old Amali does not look forward to going to her state-run school in Sri Lanka where her teacher singles her out because she is a Christian. In class, the teacher berates Amali for being a Christian and orders her not to go to church. As the only Christian in her class, Amali feels like an outcast.¹⁸

Laos, 2010

12-year-old Som is a Khmu Christian who lives in a village in Laos. One day, he and about 20 of his Christian friends gathered together in a village hut to sing worship songs. Another group of boys found them singing and taunted the Christians outside the hut, saying, "Your God is not a true God," and "If you come out, we will beat you up!" The Christian youth locked the bamboo door of the hut and remained trapped inside for hours while they waited for the bullies to

¹⁶ *Voice of the Martyrs Canada: Bold Believers Magazine for Students*, "Escape from Kidnappers," 1st Quarter 2009, 2-3.

¹⁷ Compass Direct News, "Pakistani Muslim Forces to Convert, Marry Him." Available online: <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/pakistan/4229/>, accessed February 28, 2012.

¹⁸ Roshini Wickremesinhe, "They Walk on Water," *Christian Solidarity Worldwide Response Magazine*, 1st Quarter 2006, 11.

leave. A few days later, Som ran into the same bullies outside his school. The bullies pushed him to the ground, hit him on the back and face and ran away before Som fainted. Som woke up two hours later and slowly made his way back home. Som's father reported the attack to the authorities but they did nothing.¹⁹

Laos, 2010

Vanee is a 12-year-old Christian girl in Laos. "Kids tell me not to be their friend," Vanee says. "They don't want me to come to school because I'm a Christian. People threaten and curse us and tell us to stop being Christians," Vanee says. "The police came and forced us to leave our home. I was scared. They threw my sister and me into a truck, then pointed a gun at my dad. My family has been kicked out of our home and village three times because we are Christians."²⁰

Mexico, 2009

Manuel goes to school in Chiapas, Mexico. Although he is 12 years old, Manuel is still in first grade because he keeps getting expelled. This is because Manuel comes from a Christian family and in recent years, traditionalists in his region have prevented some Christian children from registering for school and have expelled many of those who have registered.²¹

d) *Children used as a means of targeting adults*

Some children are not attacked for their own faith, but for the faith of their parents, church or community. In some cases, persecutors have harmed children in an effort to pressure their parents to renounce Christ.

Pakistan, 2004

Neha was born into a Christian family in Pakistan. Neha's father, Amir (not his real name), had a boss who for years pressured him to convert to Islam. Amir refused to renounce his faith, even when his boss threatened his family. As punishment, Neha, at the age of two-and-a-half, was brutally raped.

When Neha's parents found her bleeding body, they immediately sought medical care. Several local hospitals turned them away because Neha's family is Christian. When they finally found a place that would treat her, Neha had to undergo complicated surgery to repair the extensive damage inflicted on her

¹⁹ *Voice of the Martyrs Canada: Bold Believers Magazine for Students*, "Bullies Attack Christian Boy," 1st Quarter, 2011, p. 2-3.

²⁰ *Voice of the Martyrs*, "Kids of Courage." Available from <http://www.kidsofcourage.com/?p=2665>, accessed February 28, 2012.

²¹ *Voice of the Martyrs Canada: Bold Believers Magazine for Students*, "Christian Kids Kept Out of School," 4th Quarter 2009, p. 5.

body. Some damage was irreparable, leaving Neha with the inability to urinate properly, no hope of bearing children, and severe emotional trauma.

Neha's parents reported the rape to the police, but as is often the case with those who belong to religious minorities in their community, the local authorities offered no protection. Immediately following the rape, Neha's family went into hiding until they were helped and brought to Canada in 2009.²² However, in 2006, thanks to a Pakistani Christian government official, the rapist was sentenced to life imprisonment for the rape of a minor.²³

3. Psychological impacts of religious persecution

The impact of religious persecution on a child's psychological health is another significant concern in considering the impact of religious persecution on children. Roshini Wickremesinhe of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka highlights some of the simple questions that children ask when their family, church, or community is targeted – questions like;

- Why do people hate us?
- Why did our neighbours attack our home?
- Why did they beat up my father? mother?
- If God really loves me, why didn't He protect us?

Understanding the simplicity and sincerity of such questions serves to highlight the unique psychological needs of children who have experienced situations of conflict and persecution.²⁴

²² Anita Levesque, "Saving Neha: A Journey from Persecution to Hope and Freedom," *ActivateCFPL Blog*, March 17, 2010. Available from: <http://activatecfpl.theefc.ca/journal/2010/3/17/saving-neha-a-journey-from-persecution-to-hope-and-freedom.html#>, accessed February 28, 2012.

²³ British Pakistani Christian Association, "Good News from Canada – ICV saves a family", *BPCA Blog*, January 5, 2010. <http://britishpakistanichristian.blogspot.com/2010/01/good-news-from-canada-icv-saves-family.html>, accessed February 28, 2012.

²⁴ Roshini Wickremesinhe, "They Walk on Water," *Christian Solidarity Worldwide Response Magazine*, *Response*, 1st Quarter 2006, 11.

a) ***Psychological Trauma***

Many children who are subject to extremely distressing events suffer psychological trauma. Psychological trauma is defined as “the reaction occurring when a person is exposed to an overwhelming experience that is out of his/her control, and in relation to which earlier coping strategies are found to be insufficient.”²⁵ Studies show that psychological trauma is a phenomenon that crosses cultural divides, affecting children from diverse backgrounds.²⁶ Children, being in an earlier stage of cognitive development, are less equipped than adults to cope with traumatic incidences such as those described earlier in this report.

Experts suggest that children respond to traumatic events in a variety of ways. Trauma-related disorders and afflictions that children suffer include Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and grief.²⁷ Robert Hart explains that certain qualities are specific to child trauma, including

repeated obsessive-compulsive behavioural sequences or monotonous play in which themes or aspects of the experience are expressed, nightmares with no identifiable content; diminished interest in activities previously enjoyed; trauma specific fear, evident particularly at sensitive times such as before sleep, in darkness, in the bathroom; loss of confidence in self and others; limited future perspective; and (where younger children are concerned) loss of previously achieved developmental skills such as cleanliness or linguistic ability.²⁸

This particular type of trauma also influences the way in which a child victim’s psychological health is affected. According to Kimberly Ehntholt and William Yule, “more severe types of trauma, such as the violent death of a family member or witnessing someone

²⁵ Edith Montgomery, “Refugee children from the Middle East,” *Scandinavian Journal of Social Medicine* 26, (December 31, 1998), 9.

²⁶ Kimberly A. Ehntholt and William Yule, “Practitioner Review: Assessment and Treatment of Refugee Children and Adolescents Who Have Experienced War-Related Trauma,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* vol. 47, no. 12 (2006), 1198. [Assessment and Treatment of Refugee Children and Adolescents]

²⁷ Assessment and Treatment of Refugee Children and Adolescents, *supra* note 24, p. 1198.

²⁸ Robert Hart, “Child Refugees, Trauma and Education: Interactionist Considerations on Social and Emotional Needs and Development,” *Educational Psychology in Practice* vol. 25, no. 4. (December 2009), 11.

being injured, killed or tortured, are related to higher levels of psychological distress.”²⁹ They further expound that “an individual’s perception of the degree of direct personal threat and their level of involvement during the traumatic event are also associated with increased psychological difficulties.” Especially traumatic is the disappearance of a parent. Uncertainty regarding the death of a parent prevents the child from fully grieving, leading to high levels of anguish.³⁰ Edith Montgomery explains, “When a parent disappears, the child is left in a no-man’s land. The child cannot mourn the ‘death’ of the parent, which would serve to release energy for moving onward in life. It becomes difficult for the child to imagine a realistic future.”³¹ In addition, studies confirm a link between the political persecution and imprisonment of parents and increased symptomatology in children. Young refugees who are separated from family members are inclined to experience greater levels of distress and more likely to develop mental health problems than their associated peers.³²

b) *Variables affecting the psychological health of child victims*

In any situation of persecution, a variety of factors play a role in the psychological health of child victims, and it is important to consider how these diverse variables shape the experiences of child victims of religious persecution.

The support of a child’s family or lack thereof is a prime determinant of a child’s psychological well-being in traumatic situations. Ehnholt and Yule report that the family often serves as a safeguard against stress. In the case of refugee children, family cohesion before and after migration is a primary indicator of good mental health. Families that remain cohesive and

²⁹ Assessment and Treatment of Refugee Children and Adolescents, *supra* note 24, p. 1199.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Edith Montgomery, “Refugee children from the Middle East,” *Scandinavian Journal of Social Medicine* 26, (December 1998), 76.

³² Assessment and Treatment of Refugee Children and Adolescents, *supra* note 24, p. 1200.

adapt well to their new environments can help preserve the emotional well-being of young children who have lived in traumatic circumstances.³³

In some cases, parents themselves suffer from psychological problems, and this can make it more difficult for children to cope with their situations. A study on refugees in Canada highlights that parents who are survivors of torture and persecution themselves are sometimes incapable of providing a healthy “psychological environment” for their children.³⁴ Other studies indicate that war-affected and refugee children experience greater psychological anguish when parents, particularly mothers, are mentally unwell.³⁵

Belief systems serve as another regulator of the psychological well-being of child victims of persecution. In some cases, beliefs can serve as a buffer against psychological disorders. A study of Tibetan refugee children informs that “the sense of participating in their nation’s struggle against an oppressor and their strong Buddhist beliefs protected against mental health difficulties and accelerated the healing process.”³⁶

Although these studies focus largely on child victims of political and ethnic violence, the events that these children experience are in many ways the same as those experienced by children who are targets of religious persecution. In all cases, children may witness violence, lose a parent, be displaced, or experience torture. It follows that, as in the case of other forms of persecution, family support, and degree and type of trauma play an instrumental role in the impact of the religious persecution on the children.

³³ Assessment and Treatment of Refugee Children and Adolescents, *supra* note 31.

³⁴ Ana Marie Fantino and Alice Colak, “Refugee Children in Canada: Searching for Identity,” *Child Welfare* vol. 80, no. 5 (September/October 2001), 594.

³⁵ Assessment and Treatment of Refugee Children and Adolescents, *supra* note 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

It is also worth considering that in some cases, religious persecution may have attendant buffers, as noted above in regard to Buddhist children, which are not available to children who have experienced some other forms of persecution. For instance, children who come from Christian families may have the benefit of a church community that can support them in their time of need. Furthermore, a child's faith in itself may serve as a protector against some forms or development of psychological trauma.

If, as the aforementioned studies suggest, strong ideological commitments to a cause can ease psychological suffering for children in traumatic circumstances, it may be that children who have a faith in a caring, powerful God are better equipped to understand and cope psychologically with their losses.

India, 2008

10-year-old Namrata is a victim of attacks against Christians by radical Hindus in Orissa, India, suffering injuries from a bomb blast in one of the targeted homes. Despite the physical scars and trauma she sustained, Namrata's faith in God helped her to cope with the situation. "We forgive the Hindu radicals who attacked us, she said. They were out of their minds. They do not know the love of Jesus. For this reason, I now want to study so that when I am older, I can tell everyone how much Jesus loves us.... I feel very loved by the people of India and by so many people in the world who have ... prayed for me."³⁷

It is, however, important to recognize that in many cases of religious persecution, children witness and experience horrific events whose meanings cannot be interpreted at the time because of the child's limited cognitive framework. Children cannot be expected to have developed the necessary coping mechanisms to deal with such tragedies, regardless of background. Moreover, not all child victims of persecution have a support network to turn to in their suffering; sometimes that network dies before their eyes in the traumatic event at the

³⁷ International Day of Prayer, "IDOP 2010: Hearing Their Cry: Children's Material," 2010, p. 5. Available online: <http://idop.org/media/pdf/children.pdf>, accessed February 28, 2012.

root of their suffering. It is, therefore, the responsibility of those closest to these children as well as the community at large, both locally and internationally, to ensure that the psychological health of children who have endured religious persecution is effectively addressed. To further protect the mental health of children, the international community must seek to eliminate religious persecution altogether.

Sri Lanka, 2005

“My mother and father tell me that we love Jesus and that is why these things happened to us. But I still don’t understand why.” These are the words of seven-year-old Sunil (not his real name) from Sri Lanka after witnessing a mob attack on his church. Sunil, who was playing in the garden with his brother the night of the attack, recounts what happened when the mob arrived at his house:

“We ran and hid. They broke open the door and came into the big hall where the church meets. There was a lot of noise. They were breaking furniture and throwing things on the floor. Suddenly we heard loud noises from above and some big rocks came crashing in through the roof. I moved closer to my brother and covered my head with my hands.

Some of the men grabbed our assistant pastor by his collar and started beating him. I was too afraid to scream. They were asking for my father – the pastor. He was not at home. Where was he? I wanted him to come home, but was also afraid that if he came, they might beat him up or kill him.

I saw a bearded man throwing all the Bibles, hymn books and musical instruments on the floor and set it all on fire. Through the fire and the smoke I could see my mother crying. I hid with my brother for a very long time, afraid to come out. Finally they all left, laughing loudly. My mother tried to rock me to sleep, telling me that everything will be alright. But I couldn’t sleep ... what will happen to us now? Will people beat me up when I go to school tomorrow? What about tomorrow night? Will they return?”

Sunil doesn’t play outside in the evenings anymore. When dusk begins to fall, he prefers to be indoors close to his mother.³⁸

³⁸ Roshini Wickremesinhe, “They Walk on Water,” *Christian Solidarity Worldwide Response Magazine*, 1st Quarter 2006, 11.

4. *The Biblical mandate to protect children*

There are an estimated 2.2 billion Christians in the world. For the Church, the Bible speaks clearly to our responsibility to protect the vulnerable, particularly children. A number of Scriptures demonstrate that God is concerned for the well-being of children. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus instructs his disciples to welcome children. He says, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”³⁹ Jesus encourages our protection of children when He announces that “if anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.”⁴⁰ Additionally, the gospel of Mark records that Jesus became “indignant” when the disciples tried to keep children from visiting him. Jesus welcomed their company, stating that “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”⁴¹

Scripture also instructs us to defend those who cannot defend themselves. Proverbs 31:8 says, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.” Children, whose cries so often go unheard in situations of persecution, need the church body to plead their case.

The Christian’s response to this Biblical perspective must be one that takes responsibility for the protection of children. In our civil society, that also means engaging with government to seek such protections within our borders and beyond.

³⁹ Mark 9:37, Holy Bible (New International Version).

⁴⁰ Mark 9:42 (NIV).

⁴¹ Mark 10:14 (NIV).

5. *Children's rights: an international responsibility*

Religious persecution involves direct violation of the rights of the child and, in other situations, the rights of children are at risk of being violated. The international community has agreed that the protection of children's rights is a concern that must be addressed collectively. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (hereafter Convention) was established in 1989 to be a major international safeguard of children's rights and has been ratified by nearly all states, including Canada. Its formation represents the need to recognize that "children are citizens today," and not just investments in the future.⁴² Moreover, the international community agrees that in meeting the needs of children, we are meeting the needs of society at large. This was conveyed by young people at the General Assembly of the United Nations at the Special Session on Children in May 2002 when they said, "We want a world fit for children, because a world fit for us is a world fit for everyone."⁴³

A world fit for children is one that upholds freedom of religion. The Convention contains a number of articles pertinent to situations where children suffer religious persecution. This includes Article three, which states:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.⁴⁴

⁴² Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, "Children: The Silenced Citizens: Effective Implementation of Canada's International Obligations with Respect to the Rights of Children," April 2007. Available online: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/391/huma/rep/rep10apr07-e.pdf>, accessed February 28, 2012.

⁴³ Quoted in "Children: The Silenced Citizens: Effective Implementation of Canada's International Obligations with Respect to the Rights of Children," by the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, April 2007. Available online: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/391/huma/rep/rep10apr07-e.pdf>, accessed February 28, 2012.

⁴⁴ U.N. General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November, 1989. Available online: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm> . [Convention on the Rights of the Child]

Religious persecution is never in the best interests of the child and the Convention should serve as impetus for the international community to address situations in which religious persecution occurs.

Of further note is Article 14 which requires state parties to “respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”⁴⁵ While acknowledging that children are meant to be guided by their parents in their beliefs, this article highlights that children have as much right to choose what to think and believe, as well as to practice their beliefs without undue interference by others.

In most areas where religious persecution occurs, Christians (or other identified faith communities) are a minority group. As such, Article 30 on children of minorities/indigenous groups is particularly helpful to our engagement and their intended protection:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.⁴⁶

In addition, the Convention addresses the protection of children after they have already suffered persecution. Article 39 on the rehabilitation of child victims states:

Children who have been neglected, abused or exploited should receive special help to physically and psychologically recover and reintegrate into society. Particular attention should be paid to restoring the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.⁴⁷

With this direction, governments should seek to provide adequate care for children who have experienced neglect, abuse or exploitation because of religious persecution. In addition,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Convention on the Rights of the Child, *supra* note 44.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

governments should give careful consideration to child victims of persecution who are seeking asylum within their borders, prioritizing the restoration and protection of their well-being. The protection of children's rights requires the active cooperation of states and international bodies in enforcing these laws. A lack of cooperation in this area remains an obstacle to effective protection of children's rights. Violations of the Convention continue to go unaddressed in many countries. At the same time, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child remains a central mechanism in the international pursuit to safeguard the rights of children worldwide.

6. Organizations helping child victims of religious persecution

Several non-governmental organizations are reaching out to child victims of persecution.

The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), a member in the World Evangelical Alliance, is one such organization. The NCEASL is a multid denominational church body that seeks to transform Sri Lankan communities by advocating for human rights, addressing development issues, seeking peace and reconciliation, and sharing the gospel message.⁴⁸ Among other efforts, the NCEASL provides emergency assistance for pastors and families in Sri Lanka who have experienced violent persecution, gives annual scholarships to select students who are children of persecuted pastors and workers, and holds an annual camp for children of persecuted Christians.⁴⁹

Voice of the Martyrs – a network of ministries working with persecuted Christians around the world – responds to child victims of persecution in several nations, including Nigeria and

⁴⁸ National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, "About NCEASL," <http://www.nceasl.org/NCEASL/aboutus/aboutnceasl.php>.

⁴⁹ National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, "Annual Report of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka," 2010.

India. In Nigeria, VOM supports a sponsorship program for children who have lost one or both parents to persecution. These children attend a secure residential school operated by a partner organization. The school provides them with medical care, food, clothing, and quality education. Through this, many children find healing and are given a second chance to live healthy, productive lives.⁵⁰ In addition, VOM partners with a children's residential school in Indore, India – a home for 125 children who have fled their native state of Orissa as a result of violent religious persecution. The school looks after the daily needs and healthcare of these children and provides them with education.⁵¹

Intercede International is an organization operating in Vietnam that “seeks to establish, encourage, and strengthen an indigenous, New Testament witness for our Lord Jesus Christ among all nations by providing material and spiritual aid to Christians who are impoverished, few, or persecuted.” Intercede provides financial aid to families of pastors that have been imprisoned for preaching the gospel, as well as widows of pastors.⁵²

Barnabas Aid supports a girls' rescue centre in rural Kenya, a region where Christian girls and women live under the pressure to conform to traditional beliefs and customs, including polygamy, female circumcision, and child marriage. Often these practices are forced on them and they are mistreated for standing up for their beliefs. The girls' rescue centre provides a home, food, and clothing for those seeking refuge from these abusive situations.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Voice of the Christian Martyrs: Nigeria Special Edition*, “The Nigeria Special Children Relive the Past,” 2010, 4; 8-13.

⁵¹ Cheryl Odden, “Facing Death, Yet More than Conquerors,” *Voice of the Martyrs Canada Newsletter*, March 2011, 1.

⁵² Intercede International, “Vietnam for Christ,” available online: http://www.intercedenow.ca/report/740VFC_2315.pdf, accessed February 28, 2012.

⁵³ Barnabas Aid, “Barnabas Helps Christian Girls Escape Abuse in Kenya,” 14 January, 2011. Available online: <https://barnabasfund.org/US/News/Archives/Barnabas-helps-Christian-girls-escape-abuse-in-Kenya.html>, accessed February 16, 2011.

7. Recommendations for the Canadian Government

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and as a nation that constitutionally adheres to a high standard of human rights, Canada is well situated to play an active role in promoting children’s rights domestically and internationally. This includes protecting children who are vulnerable to and victims of religious persecution. To this end, recommendations for the Canadian government fall under three categories: diplomatic engagement with foreign governments, engagement with NGOs and civil society, and protection of child rights within our borders.

1. Diplomatic Engagement:

The Canadian government can do much to improve the plight of children through diplomatic engagement with foreign governments. In the area of government-to-government relations, there are three recommendations:

- a. Hold foreign governments accountable to their international commitments to protect children’s rights. More specifically, the government is called upon to draw attention to situations in which the rights of children are being violated as a result of religious persecution and exercise diplomatic and other pressure on the respective governments to put a stop to these infringements.
- b. Encourage foreign governments to support (and in some instances provide protection for) NGOs, churches and community-based organizations that foster a healthy environment for children.

- c. Develop and support initiatives that promote and protect holistic child development. This should be done with sensitivity to cultural and familial dynamics and consideration for the perspectives of the young people themselves.

2. Engagement with NGOs and Civil Society:

NGOs and civil society play a central role in the promotion and protection of children's rights. Indeed, it is the work of these bodies that has propelled the children's rights movement.⁵⁴ The government is encouraged to support and partner with the efforts of these strategic groups. Three specific recommendations are:

- a. Respond promptly to the alerts and reports of NGOs working in areas where children suffer religious persecution, demonstrating a commitment to awareness and understanding of the situation and partnership with those in the field.
- b. Partner with Canadian and foreign churches, and other faith organizations, in raising awareness about religious persecution, particularly as it impacts children.
- c. Increase financial support to organizations that contribute to the health and protection of children.

3. Protecting Children's Rights within our Borders:

Canada's commitment to protecting children's rights internationally must go hand-in-hand with government efforts to protect children's rights domestically. Of particular relevance to the issue of religious persecution, particularly that which occurs in the international community, is the need for an immigration system that effectively recognizes, provides for and protects vulnerable children. Adherence to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should include

⁵⁴ Eckhard Fuchs. "Children's Rights and Civil Society" *Comparative Education* vol. 43, no. 3 (2007) 393-412.

sensitivity to refugee cases in Canada that involve children who have suffered religious persecution.

The Canadian Coalition for the Rights of the Child has highlighted deficiencies in Canada's immigration system with regard to children's rights. Of particular concern are the rights of unaccompanied asylum seekers. The Canadian government has yet to delineate a clear policy framework for ensuring that these children's rights are safeguarded in matters such as guardianship, access to services and deportation.⁵⁵ This deficiency leaves child refugees who are victims of religious persecution at risk for unjust treatment in Canada. Another defective regulation prohibits children in their country of origin from joining their parents in Canada if their parents did not declare them when they immigrated.⁵⁶ These and other deficiencies leave child refugees, including victims of religious persecution, at risk for unjust treatment in Canada. Canada's immigration policies must be aligned with Canada's responsibility to the Convention so that a commitment to the welfare of the child can undergird every decision made on behalf of child refugees.

⁵⁵ Canadian Coalition for the Rights of the Children, "Best Interests of the Child: Meaning and Application in Canada," 2009, p. 41. Available online: <http://rightsofchildren.ca/wp-content/uploads/bic-report-eng-web.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Ibid. In some cases there are logical reasons that parents have not declared their children. For example, after the Rwandan genocide, a survivor came to Canada believing that her child was dead. Later she found out that her child was alive but sponsorship was refused.