

INTERCEDE

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The African Sahel Region: Challenges and Opportunities

by Mark Brink

**Mark Brink teaching sessions – Benin*

A recent trip to one of the Sahel countries opened my mind and heart to this part of the continent of Africa. While the Sahel has a thriving Christian community and a dynamic Church that is impacting the region, most Sahel countries still face major challenges. For example, of the twenty countries in the world with the highest population growth, nineteen are in Africa and the majority of those are in the Sahel itself. The country of Niger, in the central part of the Sahel, has the highest birthrate of any nation on earth. Experts believe this astronomical population explosion will likely result in massive famine in the coming years in certain areas of the Sahel. Coupled with the threat of overpopulation leading to potential famine is the threat of radical Islam. Global analysts have labeled the Sahel as the “new Afghanistan.”

The good news is that amid these enormous challenges, the Church in the Sahel is progressing in faith and obedience to the Great Commission. In this article, I want to focus on the challenges and opportunities in the Sahel Region. I pray that God will give you a passion to intercede for the countries in the Sahel and that churches will discover a renewed desire to invest in mission for this area of Africa.

Where is the Sahel?

The Sahel Region of Africa is a vast expanse that sepa-

rates the Sahara Desert to the north and tropical savannas to the south. While there is slight discrepancy regarding which countries fit into the “Sahel Region,” the commonly accepted list includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan. Others lists include parts of Cameroon, the Gambia, South Sudan, and Somalia. The Sahel belt stretches from the Atlantic coast of Senegal and southern Mauritania eastward through the “Central Sahel” countries, then into Sudan, and finally to Eritrea and the Red Sea coast.

African Christianity: A Growing Church and a Powerful Missions Force

Africa’s general population grew tremendously in the twentieth century and has continued to grow during the early part of the twenty-first century. The overall population is expected to grow to over 2.5 billion by 2050. Christianity has become the religion of half of Africa’s population. Christianity grew from 9 percent in 1900 to approximately 50 percent in 2020. As of mid-2023, there were approximately 700 million believers in Africa—with Evangelicals numbering 200 million, or 20 percent of the population. In fact, one-third of all Evangelicals live in Africa. Countries that have experienced significant church growth include Ethiopia, Sudan, Benin, Nigeria, Mozambique, and Angola,

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Until All Have Heard

How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? – Romans 10:14

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During an online session, a church leader from a Sahel country of Africa shared how the church in his country is facing severe opposition and persecution. Over 700 churches from his affiliation have closed, and pastors and parishioners have fled due to the spread of radical Islam. An inter-faith coalition called for a National Day of Prayer and Fasting. Churches throughout the nation gathered to ask the Lord to thwart the attacks of these radicals and to help them stand strong in the faith. The Holy Spirit impressed this pastor to challenge the church to pray for a transformation in three areas: 1) a reformation or return to the Word of God, 2) a revival in the church to kindle the flame of Holy Spirit faith, and 3) a reignition of outreach or evangelism to fulfill the Great Commission.

The pattern envisioned by this pastor is needed in the life of every believer, church, and country. We should ask ourselves three questions:

1. Is my life and purpose built on a biblical worldview?
2. Am I walking in a fresh daily baptism of the Holy Spirit and seeking the Holy Spirit's fruits, empowerment, baptism, and gifts?
3. Am I engaging and focusing my purpose in life on my part in the Great Commission?

As you read this edition of the *Intercede*, ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and eyes to the needs in the Sahel Region of Africa. **Over the next two months, would you focus your intercession specifically on the Sahel Region?** Also, share this need with other believers and encourage them to pray for the church in this area of Africa. Ask the Holy Spirit how you can become even more involved in helping to build the church in this part of Africa. We need a revolution of faith and action as we fulfill the Great Commission in the Sahel Region of Africa. Let us believe for great and mighty things to happen in the Sahel!

Prayer Profile – Muslim Unreached People Group

***Kanembu of Chad – Population: 962,000 – 90% Muslim – 0.01% Christian**

Between the sands of the Sahara and the shores of Lake Chad live the Kanembu. For over 1,000 years, the Kanem-Bornu Empire exerted its influence over central Africa. Today, the Kanembu people are one group of the descendants of this great empire, and their sultans and traditional rules are still more influential than government authorities. They are Chad's merchant tribe, with 75% of all merchants in Chad coming from this group, making them one of Chad's wealthiest groups.

The Kanembu still await being reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Their practice of Islam is mixed with African traditional beliefs. Outwardly they conform to Islam but depend on a form of spiritism to meet daily problems. *Marabouts*, spiritual leaders, are often sought for their healing power or for their ability to communicate with spirits.

The style of living has changed little in the last thousand years, although modern conveniences, such as vehicles, water pumps, and sewing machines have been added alongside their traditional lifestyle. Today, as Chad's main merchant group, Kanembu can be found in all major towns and villages. The current "high school" generation (ages 15 – 30) seeks to escape the village and find a more fulfilling life and job in the outside world. The pull to urban centers, especially to the capital, is very strong.

Prayer Points

1. Pray for a broad sowing of the seed of God's Word among the Kanembu.
2. Pray for gospel radio programs that are targeted to reach the Kanembu.
3. Pray that prayer teams will be raised up to intercede for the Kanembu people.
4. Pray for evangelism teams who regularly show the *Jesus Film*.
5. Pray for Kanembu youth; many are moving to urban areas where they are more likely to encounter Christians and hear the gospel.

**For further information on the Kanembu people, see www.joshuaproject.net*

Muslim World News

Swing-state Muslim Leaders “Abandon” Biden

UNITED STATES – Muslim leaders from several swing states on December 2 descended on Dearborn, Michigan, to launch a national campaign against the reelection of President Joe Biden—a response to his handling of the Israel-Hamas conflict.

“We’re looking into finding ways to build a mechanism of coordination between all the swing states so that we’re constantly working together to ensure that Muslim Americans will come out in all of these states, and that Mr. Biden will lose each and every one of them,” said Hassan Abdel Salam, a professor at the University of Minnesota and a member of the #AbandonBiden National Coalition, during a press conference Saturday. “Right behind me, what Mr. Biden should see is 111 electoral votes. And he won last time with 74.”

It’s unclear how expansive or successful the campaign will be, but its creation speaks to the mounting political pressure facing Biden amid the conflict in the Middle East. For nearly two months, Muslim and Arab leaders have pushed the president to call for a cease-fire, and now, with more than 20,000 dead in Gaza, this new coalition is dialing up the pressure.

The bubbling anger among Muslim Americans could threaten Biden’s chances of re-election in many of the swing states in 2024, all of which contain key pockets of Arab American and Muslim American voting blocs. – *POLITICO*

India to Withdraw *Hijab* Ban

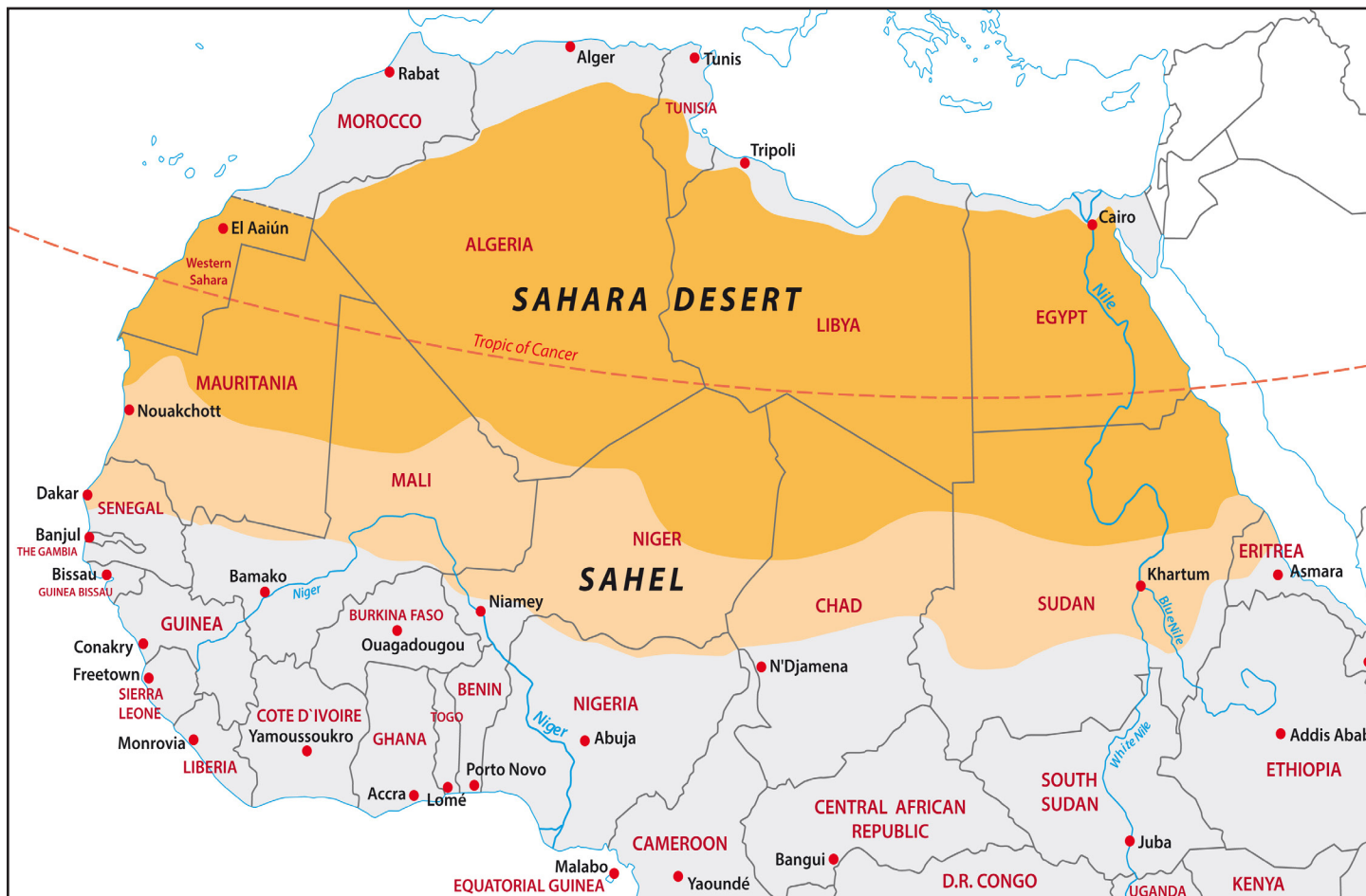
INDIA – The Indian southern state of Karnataka decided to revoke a ban on wearing headscarves inside educational premises, the state’s top elected official said on December 22.

“I have told [officials] to withdraw the *hijab* ban,” Chief Minister Siddaramaiah wrote on X, while pointing the finger at the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which he said is “doing the work of dividing people and dividing society on the basis of clothes, dress, caste.” The Press Trust of India reported that Siddaramaiah said restrictions on wearing the *hijab* will be lifted December 23 in the state, which is ruled by the Indian National Congress party.

The issue of the *hijab* ban started when female Muslim students were barred last January from entering classrooms at a government college in the state’s Udupi district because they were wearing hijabs. The issue spread to other institutions in Karnataka state, then ruled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party.

Students approached the Karnataka High Court, which upheld the ban and ruled that “wearing of *hijab* by Muslim women doesn’t form a part of essential religious practice in the Islamic faith.”

In 2023, India’s Supreme Court delivered a split ruling on a ban imposed by universities on wearing headscarves inside educational premises in Karnataka state. – *ANEWS.com*



The African Sahel Region: C

just to name a few. Pentecostal groups have become a major element in the African Church with their strong emphasis on the Scriptures, expectancy of miracles, fervency in intercessory prayer, spiritual warfare against the powers of darkness, Holy Spirit baptism for empowerment of all believers, and a strong emphasis on outreach.

Africa is becoming the global Christian center of gravity and is producing strong leaders, theologians, pastors, and missionaries. However, along with the dynamic growth in significant portions of the continent, Christians leaders consider the Sahel Region as the biggest missiological challenge facing the African Church.

The Challenge of Radical Islam

Radical Islamists have gained control over substantial portions of several Sahel countries. Islamist terror attacks have produced millions of internally displaced people. Al-Shabab is an al-Qaida affiliated jihadist group that aims to create an Islamic state in Somalia and surrounding countries. Boko Haram and other radical Islamic groups have especially targeted Nigeria. In the last decade, Boko Haram alone has been responsible for more than 18,000 deaths. Their goal is to establish *Sharia* law, or Islamic law, based on the Quran and Hadith. Forced conversions of Christians to Islam and kidnappings of Christian girls have become common practices in northern Nigeria. In the Central and Western Sahel, the vacuum created by unstable governments has given rise to “second tier” Islamic terror groups. In the last few years, Niger, Benin, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Mali have seen the greatest expansion of Islamic terror groups. Islamic radicals will attempt further expansion in 2024 as they conduct their *jihad* activities against the Church and governments of the Sahel.

The rise in persecution has been dramatic. Radical Islam’s overt persecution in the Sahel is a spiritual battle in which Satan is trying to quell an advancing Church. Various radical Islamic groups specifically target churches, Christians, police stations, shopping centers, communication systems, and Christian aid workers. Forms of persecution in the Sahel include physical violence, extremist teachings, mob activities, restricted access to the Scriptures, hindering of worship services, destruction of churches and Christian homes, implementation of *Sharia* law, and the outright killing of converts. In short, the battle is for Islam to replace Christianity. Despite all this, the Christians in the Sahel continue to share the gospel with their Muslim neighbors and fellow citizens. Sahel Christians have a clear understanding of Paul’s reminder in Ephesians 6:12: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

The Challenge of Socioeconomics

Socioeconomic factors, such as desertification and its impact on farming and economies, tribal or ethnic unrest, and the recent Covid-19 pandemic, contribute to the growing instability in the Sahel. The results of this “perfect storm” of factors have been devastating. Missionaries, aid workers, and news reporters have withdrawn from the region, and people around the world do not hear about the desperate sit-

uations taking place in the Sahel. The global Christian community must face the challenge of supporting the Church in the Sahel and engaging the region with humanitarian assistance, encouragement for evangelism, and church planting. The inspiring and encouraging news is that amid these challenges, the Church in the Sahel is showing great resilience. Their words and actions demonstrate a willingness to walk forward in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the victory of Jesus Christ.

Great Missiological Opportunities

Rather than focusing on the challenges, the African Church has chosen to emphasize the missiological opportunities in the Sahel Region. As noted, over the last three decades, huge areas of the Sahel Region have seen strong advances in evangelism and church planting. On the other hand, large swaths of the vast Sahel area still await effective evangelism efforts, sustained church planting, and Bible translation projects. The coastal, fertile, and urban areas have



large Christian communities, but the semi-arid, rural regions of the interior Sahel are mostly Islamic. The large people groups of the Hausa, Fulani, Wolof, Soninke, Songhai, and Malinke need concentrated evangelism efforts. Many Muslims in these people groups offer their allegiance to competing branches of Sufism (mystical Islam) called “brotherhoods.” Sufism strongly embraces the mystical elements of Islam and mixes traditional animistic practices with Islamic beliefs. These practices often place them at odds with mainline Sunni Muslims, and even with some Shia Muslims.

The Fulani people group provides a prime example of missiological opportunity within the Sahel. Fulanis comprise sixteen ethnic groups with a combined population of over 41 million. Christians comprise half of 1 percent of the Fulani population in only two of the sixteen Fulani people groups. Half of all Fulani live in Nigeria, but they are also prominent in other Sahel countries. One of the challenges in reaching them is their occupation as nomadic herders. However, mod-

Challenges and Opportunities

ernization has brought them into closer contact with urban areas where they are more likely to hear the gospel.

The African Church, along with the global Church, have the formidable opportunity of focusing on evangelism among the unreached people groups of the Sahel. In Nigeria and many other countries across the Sahel, large numbers of people are migrating to different locations due to unrest. This has enabled the Church to make unprecedented inroads among the Fulbe, Mande, Tuareg, and other groups. Some people groups now have large numbers of Christians, mostly Muslim background believers who have received the truth about Jesus Christ. God is calling Africans to missions work among huge unreached tribal groups.

A few years ago, a missionary friend spoke at the annual Nigerian Assemblies of God School of Missions. He related the following story about Musa, a Nigerian missionary among the Muslim Fulanis located in the northern states of



**Global Initiative training session – Benin*

the country:

After the first session, Musa came to me and said, “My wife and I work among the nomadic Muslim Fulani people in the north of the country.” I asked him how many people he had talked to about Jesus. He pulled out a worn leather journal and showed me that in five years he had witnessed to over 500 Fulani Muslims. He had written their names in his journal and continued to pray for them. He said, “But only a few have accepted Christ.” Then, almost shyly, he said, “But one of the converts is now a pastor. He has shared Christ with hundreds of nomadic Fulanis who move around with their cattle and camels. And some of these Muslim nomads have become followers of Jesus.” The Fulani pastor (who was saved after being witnessed to by Musa) described to Musa his “ministry” in this way: “This is the church moving around on the backs of camels.”

Praise the Lord for unsung African heroes like Musa and his wife!

The African Church is taking the Great Commission seriously by putting in place the foundational pillars for future evangelism. Here are further encouraging signs and opportunities of missional engagement by the African Church:

- **African Prayer Movements.** Some all-night prayer meetings attract up to 500,000 Christ-followers. The familiarity of Africans with the reality of spiritual warfare and their faithful intercession are possibly the most significant factors in the remarkable church growth on the continent.
- **Evangelism Initiatives.** National constituencies and individual churches are deliberately targeting the unreached. African missions commissions and initiatives are mobilizing to evangelize the unreached places and peoples of Africa, and beyond. The African Assemblies of God Missions Commission is committed “to facilitate the missionary enterprise of national churches across Africa by every means possible.” Countries like Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire have been pioneers in preparing and sending missionaries—primarily to neighboring Muslim nations, but also to North African countries and beyond.
- **Schools of Mission (SOMs).** SOMs are presently operating in several countries—with others in the planning stages. SOMs offer a curriculum for preparing candidate missionaries to communicate the gospel in the most effective ways, particularly in Muslim contexts.
- **Bible Schools and Seminaries.** These formal education entities are including more courses on the theology and practice of missions. Along with academic courses, additional opportunities are opening for missions internships.

Responding to the Challenges and Opportunities in the Sahel

The first response is to engage in intensified intercession for the Sahel. God will answer if we will do the work of “warfare prayer” and fight the battle on our knees. At Global Initiative, we see how the Holy Spirit is working among Muslims through dreams, visions, signs and wonders, and miracles. We have no doubt that all of this is due to decades of intense and consistent intercession. Here is how you can intercede for the Sahel Region:

- Pray for continued commitment to sustained intercession; pray that a “prayer movement” will arise and that missions intercession will take priority. Cry out to the Lord of the Harvest for more laborers from Africa to be called and released to reach the continent of Africa and beyond.
- Pray for Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) in Sahel countries. In Burkina Faso, believers are aggressively reaching out to IDPs with humanitarian aid, spiritual help, and beginning churches among them.
- Pray for wisdom for church leaders and their congregations, who must answer difficult questions such as:

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- ◊ Is it wise to continue meeting in the church building or flee?
- ◊ Should we divide into house groups?
- ◊ Should we flee the village?
- ◊ How do we continue to support the pastor and one another as believers lose their property and livelihood?
- ◊ How do we continue to disciple seekers and new believers?
- ◊ What can we do for the influx of people who have just fled to our area?
- Pray for supernatural revelations of Jesus to come to many jihadists.

The second response is to consider the call for workers among Sahel peoples, especially the Muslims of this region. God is calling Africans and global workers to the Sahel, but more are needed. Yes, there are challenges—but the Holy Spirit is issuing a “Macedonian Call” on behalf of the Sahel Region. We must work while it is day. Hear the Lord’s call to place your life, your finances, and other “sacrifices” on the altar. Ask the Lord what your personal response might involve. Can you go? Can you help send? One young African man, who heard the call of God and offered his life to Jesus, shared the following miraculous story with me:

As a young boy, my father sent me to an Islamic

school to study the Quran. But Islam did not answer my deepest spiritual questions, like “How can my sins be forgiven?” and “Does God love me?” Later, when I went to college, I was attracted to the message of the gospel through the lives of some Christian students who invited me to church. These Christian students were so kind, and I was impressed with their godly lives. Sadly, my college education was interrupted when my father sent me to fight alongside Muslim radicals. But I knew in my heart this was not right. One night after fighting alongside the *jihadists*, I grew weary and cried out to Jesus Christ to save me. I vowed to serve Him if He would help me escape. Miraculously, I saw an opportunity and was able to escape in the middle of the night. I went straight to an Assemblies of God church and surrendered my life to Christ. Later, I attended a training provided by *Global Initiative* where I learned how to share Jesus with Muslims. Now I am a church planter in the area where I once fought to spread Islam! God changed me from a persecutor to a pastor and missionary!

In closing, I ask you to join us in interceding for the Sahel. Pray that God will raise up more African workers and that God will show you your role in reaching the unreached people groups of the Sahel Region of Africa.

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Friday, March 1, 2024. Please pray for

...peace in the Middle East. Intercede on behalf of the victims of the war in Gaza that has left death and displacement. Ask the Lord to “arise and exercise His sovereignty.”

...protection for Christians in Sudan. Recent shelling near Khartoum left two church buildings in ruins. Of Sudan’s population of 48 million, 92% are Muslim.

...the grieving family of Dr. Stephen Angbas, a Christian doctor who was the head of Angbas Hospital in the Nasarawa state of Nigeria. Dr. Angbas was known for treating both Christians and Muslims. For no apparent reason, he was killed recently by Muslim terrorists with machetes.

Friday, March 8, 2024. Please pray for

...dreams and visions from the Holy Spirit to come to Muslims during their Ramadan fasting month—which will be observed from March 10 to April 8.

...protection on the Lord’s church in Burkina Faso. Speaking of Islamic terror activities, a leading Christian figure says, “In some areas our people are surviving from day to day.”

...a strong Holy Spirit anointing on Global Initiative team members who will conduct seminars and classes in Ethiopia during March 11–April 5.

Friday, March 15, 2024. Please pray for

...the release of almost 400 Eritrean believers, including many Muslim background converts, being held without charge in Eritrean prisons.

...legal permits for a Christian ministry that provides summer camps for Muslim children in Turkiye. The leader states, “We are planting the seeds of the gospel in their young hearts.”

...success for a Christian “youth camp ministry” that works among Muslims in the northern regions of Ghana. The director says, “Many Muslim youths receive Christ and ask for baptism.”

Friday, March 22, 2024. Please pray for

...strength for a former Muslim, Hajara, in Uganda. Hajara attended a church service where she received Jesus as Lord. Her husband lit her on fire. Neighbors took her to a hospital where she recovered from third-degree burns. Hajara is being cared for by Christian friends.

...success for the Light of the World Bible distribution ministry in the Middle East, especially Arabic and Farsi versions. The director states, “The more we give the more are wanted.”

...the release of 50 converts from Islam who were arrested recently by security forces across five cities in northwestern Iran. All of the arrested were attendees of unofficial “house churches.”

Friday, March 29, 2024. Please pray for

...the well-being of the tiny Christian minority of Yemen (mainly converts from Islam). Due to civil war, 500,000 Yemeni children under the age of 5 suffer acute malnutrition.

...courage for indigenous Christians of Morocco, consisting almost entirely of converts from Islam. Indigenous believers face discrimination and reprisals from family and friends.

...protection for Christians in Algeria. Believers have been forced to meet discreetly in homes due to the closure of so many church buildings. To date, 41 church buildings have been closed.



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Friday, April 5, 2024. Please pray for

...*Holy Spirit revelations to penetrate the hearts of Muslims during Laylat al-Qadr (Night of Power). For most Muslims, Laylat al-Qadr falls on the 27th night of Ramadan (April 6 this year) and marks the date of Muhammad's first Quranic revelation.*

...*a powerful anointing of the Holy Spirit on Global Initiative team members who will conduct equipping classes at a major Asian seminary during the dates of April 8–May 3.*

...*Muslims to seek the truth about Jesus during Eid al-Fitr (Breaking of the Fast), occurring April 9–10. After 30 days of Ramadan fasting, Muslims mark the breaking of the fast with a celebratory meal in the evenings—accompanied by visitations and exchanging of gifts.*

Friday, April 12, 2024. Please pray for

...*wisdom for Mahin, a maid in the home of a Muslim holy man in an Arab Gulf state. Mahin says, "Fatima, the sheikh's wife, glimpsed me reading my Bible. She secretly requested an Arabic copy and I managed one for her. Each day I see her reading it. Please pray for Fatima."*

...*protection for Reza, in a major city of Iran. He says, "I distribute Bibles to Muslims. In one year 68 men and 95 women have given their hearts to Jesus."*

...*courage for Zahra, in Afghanistan. She says, "Pray for us. We have nine house church meetings per week for our Muslim neighbors. Their hearts are starving for spiritual truth."*

Friday, April 19, 2024. Please pray for

...*the "ministry" of Ahwat, a convert from Islam, who lives in Uzbekistan. He says, "At my road-side stand, I sell fruits and vegetables. On one end of my table I have free Bibles and DVDs of "The Life of Christ." Almost every car accepts the gifts, and most of them are Muslims."*

...*courage for the church in Egypt. Before 2017 it was almost impossible to receive a license to build new churches. In 2017, the Ottoman-era restriction was abolished and, to date, more than 3,000 licenses have been granted to "previously illegal churches" or to build new structures.*

...*a change in Pakistan's blasphemy laws, often used to settle personal vendettas and target Christians. Reports estimate that 200 Christians are in Pakistani prisons on blasphemy charges.*

Friday, April 26, 2024. Please pray for

...*discipleship opportunities for Adnan, a Lebanese Muslim who read about Jesus (Isa) in the Quran. Adnan contacted a Christian pastor who led him to Christ.*

...*spiritual growth for Malik, a former Muslim. As a successful aircraft mechanic in the Arab Gulf, Malik's expertise often required him to travel. While in the United States, he was invited to church and heard the gospel for the first time. He says, "I met the extraordinary Christ."*

...*the success of a new church in Cyprus. The pastor says, "This is a safe haven for refugees from the surrounding Middle East region. Most of these refugees are former Muslims."*

**All personal names used herein are pseudonyms.*

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