

Anticipating personal persecution

Two of the most common comments heard among Christians who suddenly face overt persecution are as follows:

- 1) "It will never happen here!"
- 2) "We thought it would never happen here!"

And a common comment heard among Christians in the Persecuted World to Christians living in the affluent and "Free World" is this: "Don't ever say it won't happen here!"

In the West, the concept of tolerance now means that you must not insist on anything. It is wrong to encourage anyone own their own valid path to change to yours. The post-modern world has no place no for absolute truths, hence accusations in the West that the Bible is "hate literature" because it insists that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation (John 14).

The reality though is that it Jesus Christ who is the focus of these attacks. Because this world and its various ideologies hate Jesus Christ and His unique role and claims, persecution is targeted at His followers. As Jesus said, "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15.20).

The question then is not how do we respond to brothers and sisters living under persecution, but how may we best prepare ourselves for living under overt persecution?

This question of preparing for overt persecution is particularly important for Adventists in the West. Adventist eschatology reveals that in the end times, God's faithful remnant will not be a triumphant, glorious and well-received global movement, but it will be a church militant, under severe economic sanction, enduring public and legal opprobrium, shorn of its institutions, tax-free exemptions, grants of land, access to banking, legal, visa and financial instruments, and ultimately facing the death penalty for refusing to accept the Mark of the Beast.

Yet, the current modus operandi for the global SDA Church relies on a benign banking, legal, tax and political environment, in which visas are issued on request, funds move globally without hindrance, tax benefits are actively sought and granted, and overt institutions grow and receive public applause.

Adventists in general, and western Adventists in particular, must recognize and internalize the reality that the message entrusted to God's end-time remnant compels us to prepare for persecution by learning the deep spiritual lessons from the Persecuted Church of the 21st Century, and to understand that the freedoms currently enjoyed in the West are merely a temporary and transient stepping stone to overwhelming legal, social and financial pressures seeking to either force Adventists to comply with wider social mores, or be closed down as a public institution and as a public voice.

Adventist administrators face huge internal pressures from their constituencies to keep local SDA institutions going. Pressures to maintain ongoing employment for Adventists, to support the tithe base, to maintain cherished facilities, and to pour funds into unviable institutions are huge. Woe betide any conference president who recommends the closure of a cherished academy or school to the local constituency!

This focus on maintaining current infrastructure and institutions ensures that Adventist administrators in the West are ignoring their theoretically primary role as spiritual shepherds, which would suggest they focus not on preserving the past (which in the form of SDA institutions will one day be destroyed anyway by a hostile public environment), but on equipping and guiding the Church spiritually for the coming storm.

Adventists and the coming final persecution

How then can western Adventists prepare for the coming storm?

One option would be to enter a bunker mentality, cower in fear, and lose any desire to be a blessing for the world around. Another option would be to buy properties in remote mountain areas and become "preppers." Some may lash out in aggression, seeking via the political processes to enforce a "Christian" morality in each nation. Others yet may smile complacently, and say that these things must be, that persecution will shake the chaff (i.e. others) out of the Church while leaving the true grain (i.e. me), so bring it on! And still others will have a speech that is harsh, critical, condemning and

aggressive towards the lost all around us, when many of the lost are seeking a winsome, wooing and winning manifestation of God's love in their own community.

None of the above responses to persecution are legitimately derived from the Bible in general, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular.

A more biblical approach would be to prepare for persecution in 3 ways:

1. Intellectually – I know I will experience persecution.
2. Practically – I have prepared my family and those I pastor for persecution after I am gone.
3. Spiritually – I am ready for persecution.

The Holy Spirit reveals to us through the Apostle Paul the truth that those living through persecution are able to teach disciples living in the free world incredible biblical truths about what true discipleship means. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Cor. 1.3-4, NRSV). Thus Adventists in the West need to ask in humility and with profound respect of those living under persecution for the lessons they have learned so all may be better prepared for the anticipated global storm.

How do we respond to those experiencing persecution?

“When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great,” (Job 2:12-13). Iraqi Christian women who have lost their daughters to ISIS cause us in like manner to sit in silence before such suffering. Slow down, switch off, be silent, affirm the victim's right to grief, and weep with those who weep. We cannot simply ignore the suffering of those who bear the name of Christ.

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). We pray for and practically support brothers and sisters going through persecution.

“Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82:3-4). God calls us to be a voice for the voiceless in their suffering and injustice, e.g. signing petitions, writing to our representatives in Congress etc.

“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Hebrews 13:3). We are to educate ourselves about religious liberty, and to reach out whenever possible to those suffering for Christ.

“Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute” (Prov. 31.8). We are not called to be a comfortable middle-class church, assuming that because we are OK than everyone else must be OK. We worship God according to our conscience (RL & the greatest commandment), and He in turn calls us to “love our neighbor as ourselves” (the 2nd commandment). Thus we cannot preach RL but be silent on segregated congregations or marginalized communities, or be silent on hungry children in our midst, or be silent while abuse victims sit in suffering silence in our pews, or be silent while single parents struggle to survive from day to day. Precisely because of our RL spiritual birthright, we are called to speak up about and minister to those caught in human trafficking, police brutality, economic inequality, unsustainable debt, family breakdown, environmental degradation, moral chaos and systemic social injustice.

In practice, there is much we can do.

1. Become engaged in Religious Liberty ministry.
2. Pray for those being persecuted, for prisoners of conscience and their families.
3. Educate ourselves on Religious Liberty issues and trends.
4. Pray for those being persecuted, for prisoners of conscience and their families.
5. Join the NARLA (www.religiousliberty.info).
6. Pray for those being persecuted, for prisoners of conscience and their families.
7. Sign up for the Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors USA newsletters.

8. Pray for those being persecuted, for prisoners of conscience and their families.
9. Provide financial, emotional and practical support for the families of prisoners of conscience.
10. Pray for those being persecuted, for prisoners of conscience and their families.
11. Become active in the NAD's refugee and immigrant ministry (www.refugeeministries.com).
12. Pray for those being persecuted, for prisoners of conscience and their families.
13. Read the reports of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (<http://www.uscirf.gov/>).
14. Pray....pray....pray.