

Under the new Religion Law, organisations would need to have at least 100 adult founder members living in the same district, 500 adult members in the same oblast (region) and 3,000 adult members living “proportionately” in at least five of the country’s nine regions. The current Religion Law requires organisations to have only 200 adult founder members living anywhere in Kyrgyzstan.

This proposed law presents serious difficulties for churches, many of which already struggle to amass 200 signatures. Many Christians are reluctant to declare their membership for fear of increased state surveillance of their private lives.

Pray that this proposed new legislation will not be passed into law. Ask for wisdom for church leaders to guide God’s people in these challenging times.

.gives – Shipments heading for Fiji, Ukraine, Zimbabwe

Please keep praying for the distribution of aid across the world through our .gives projects. At the time of writing two containers of food are on their way to Fiji

from Australia; a shipment is crossing from the USA on its way to Ukraine; and a container of lentils has left Australia destined for Zimbabwe.

Five consignments have been successfully delivered in recent weeks. Two containers from Germany reached Ukraine containing dried food, hygiene items, clothing and sleeping bags. Two pallets of dehydrated vegetables have been sent to Haiti from the United States, fortified with our own vitamin mix. In October a 40-foot container of dried soup mix from the USA was distributed to struggling Namibian Christians. Hungry Christians in South Sudan received a container from the UK filled with .gives boxes and assorted clothes. A shipment of ePap from South Africa has been delivered in Zimbabwe.

Give thanks for the successful distribution of aid to five countries. Pray for the safe arrival of shipments to Fiji, Ukraine and Zimbabwe. Ask the Lord to protect drivers making hazardous journeys across war-torn terrain in Ukraine and abundantly bless Christians with His joy and hope as they receive vital aid.

For more information visit: www.barnabasaid.org

United Kingdom

Unit 23, Ash Industrial Estate,
Kembrey Park, Swindon SN2 8UN
Telephone 01793 744557
Email info@barnabasaid.org

South Africa

Appletree House No 6 Paul Kruger Street
Stellenbosch 7600 **Telephone** +27211376495
Email bfsa@barnabasaid.org

Australia

GPO Box 612, Adelaide SA 5001
Telephone (08) 8117 8079 or 1300 365 799
Email bfaustralia@barnabasaid.org

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

Office 101, Russell Business Centre,
40–42 Lisburn Road, Belfast BT9 6AA
Please send post to our UK office
address. **Telephone** 02891 455246
Email ireland@barnabasaid.org

New Zealand

PO Box 276018, Manukau City,
Auckland 2241 **Telephone** (09) 280 4385
or 0800 008 805
Email office@barnabasaid.org.nz



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New Year – A time to pray for Christian minorities in other religious contexts

The Western New Year can be a time of increased danger of violent attack for Christian minorities in parts of the world where this season is considered to be a Christian celebration.

Pray for the protection of our vulnerable brothers and sisters. Ask, too, that they will be kept from fear, filled with the knowledge that they dwell in the shelter of the Most High, and rest in the shadow of the Almighty (Psalm 91:1). Pray that they may face the coming 12 months with joy and hope, springing from their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bangladesh – Upcoming general election on January 7 2024

Bangladesh will hold a general election on Sunday 7 January. The current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, is seeking a fourth consecutive term in office and there have been violent protests and many arrests as supporters of the main opposition party demand her resignation. Sheikh Hasina has done much to protect

the rights of Christians and other non-Muslim minorities in Bangladesh. She has affirmed the equality of all Bangladeshi citizens and her government has paid for the construction of 84 churches and provided part funding for 643 church building projects, particularly in tribal areas.

Pray for peaceful and fair elections, and that the Lord will work out His purposes for Bangladesh through them.

Algeria – Senior church leader’s sentence reduced with further appeal pending

Praise God for answered prayer. At the appeal hearing of Algerian pastor Youssef Ourahmane on 19 November his original sentence of two years’ imprisonment was reduced to one year. His fine of £605 (\$725; €665) remained the same, however.

Please keep praying. Pastor Youssef has issued a second appeal to a higher provincial court and is awaiting a date for a further hearing. He was originally charged with allegedly holding an unauthorised religious meeting in a building not permitted to be used for

religious worship (see *Prayer Focus Update*, November 2023).

Give thanks for the halving of Pastor Youssef's sentence and pray earnestly for the success of this second appeal. Pray that he will be acquitted of all charges against him, and his fine will also be dismissed. Ask that his pastoral duties will not be impeded further. Continue to lift up Pastor Youssef and his family at this testing time and pray that their trust in the Lord will grow and dispel fear and anxiety (Jeremiah 17:7-8). Ask that the Church in Algeria will increase in insight in handling the continuing campaign of forced church building closures.

Mali – Church minister released after a year in captivity

Thank you for praying. German church minister Hans-Joachim Lohre has been set free from captivity at the hands of Islamists in Mali.

Hans-Joachim, 66, was kidnapped in November 2022 by the Islamist extremist group Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, which has close links to Al Qaeda (see *Prayer Focus Update*, January 2023). There have been several instances of kidnapping of foreign missionaries by such groups in Mali in recent years. He was released on Sunday 26 November after just over a year in captivity. Hans-Joachim had lived in Mali for more than 30 years.

Praise God for Hans-Joachim's release. Pray that he will recover from the ordeal of captivity, and he will grow in faith as the God of all grace makes him strong, firm and steadfast (1 Peter 5:10). Ask that the Church in Mali will be strengthened, and that Islamists' plans to take over the country will not succeed. Pray also that further attempts to abduct foreign missionaries will be thwarted, if the Lord wills.

Philippines – Four killed, 50 injured in church bombing by Islamist militants

Four people were killed and 50 others injured when a bomb was detonated at a church

service in the southern Philippines at around 7.30am on Sunday 3 December. Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) militants claimed responsibility for the attack at the service held in a university gymnasium in Marawi on the island of Mindanao.

Marawi is one of the largest Muslim cities in the Christian-majority Philippines. In 2017, it was besieged by IS militants for five months during which time churches were destroyed and Christians held hostage. The city is part of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, effectively an Islamic sub-state within the country.

Intercede for the Christian minority in Marawi and other parts of the southern Philippines feeling threatened by this atrocity. Pray that the bereaved will know the Lord's comfort and the injured His healing power. Ask that the Christian community will draw strength and security from the Lord and renew their trust in Him (Proverbs 29:25).

Holy Land – Christians in Bethlehem

Please pray for peace and hope throughout the Holy Land. Remember especially Christians in Bethlehem, where no decorations or festivities have been allowed this Christmas – a very strange situation in the town where the Lord Jesus was born. The absence of tourists has caused a severe loss of income for many Christian families in the last three months, as Christians are particularly involved in jobs linked to tourism.

Please pray for the head teacher, staff and students of a Christian school in Bethlehem, supported by Barnabas Aid. (With support from Barnabas Aid, children from very poor Christian families can attend the school and get an excellent education in a loving Christian environment.) The head teacher wrote to us in December, "Due to the situation the children have been greatly affected emotionally and psychologically. The news every day and the

tension everywhere and the caution they have to live by has made them very anxious and hyper. Our main concern these days at school is to keep them calm and try to lessen as much of the tension as possible and work intensely on prayer sessions and readings. It is not easy at all." In the twenty years of the school's existence, she says this is the most worrying and exhausting time she has known.

Lift up to the Lord the head and all the teachers as they try to bring peace and reassurance to their anxious pupils, by prayer and other ways, in the midst of a time of great uncertainty and danger. Ask that their Christian faith will sustain and strengthen them all. Pray for Christians in Bethlehem who have lost their work, that God will provide for them. Thank Him for the good news, in the midst of all this, that the Ministry of Education has renewed the school's licence for another five years. Extend your prayers to all who are suffering across the Holy Land.

Pakistan – Christian widow and Muslim man acquitted of "blasphemy" charge

Answered prayer! Musarrat Bibi, a 46-year-old Christian widow, along with Mohammad Sarmad, a Muslim man, have been acquitted of "blasphemy" charges relating to their work at the Government Girls' Higher Secondary School in the Pakpattan District of Punjab.

On 15 April 2023 they were asked to clear a storeroom and discarded and burnt some wastepaper (see *Prayer Focus Update*, June 2023). As both employees are illiterate, they did not realise that some of the pages contained Arabic verses from the Quran. Four days later, they were arrested and charged with "blasphemy" for desecrating the Quran, a charge which

is punishable with life imprisonment. Musarrat and Mohammad were both granted bail on 13 May.

The judge at the Court of Additional Sessions in Arifwala, Pakpattan, ruled on 8 December that both employees were innocent of the charges against them.

Thank the Lord for this significant ruling proving the innocence of Musarrat and her Muslim colleague, for answered prayers and a just outcome. Pray that they will be protected from any backlash from extremists and will be able to resume their employment unhindered. Continue to lift up those in Pakistan, whether Christian, Muslim or Hindu, who face "blasphemy" allegations, which potentially lead to a death sentence. Christians in particular are vulnerable to false accusations and their testimony in court is often not given as much weight as that of their Muslim accuser. Pray that this verdict will set a precedent for God's justice to prevail (Deuteronomy 32:4) and for all unfounded cases to be thrown out swiftly.

Kyrgyzstan – Proposed new religion law would greatly tighten restrictions on churches

The Kyrgyzstan government has drafted a new law on "Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations", which was put forward on 10 November. The legislation includes several provisions that tighten restrictions on churches and other religious groups. The draft law has already been through a month-long period of public discussion, ending on 9 December. It is now being considered by the Kyrgyz parliament.

If passed into law without any changes, religious organisations would still need to be registered, and this could only be for a maximum of five years. When this period expires, the organisation would have to apply to re-register.