

My Meeting with the Persecuted
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I may confidently say that any one of us who had the privilege of attending the Cape Town 2010 Congress, was touched in significant ways. It was impossible not to stand in awe and amazement at the work that God is doing in our world. God is certainly on the move in every continent, country, town and village, and among all tribes and peoples. And while we are all busy with our ministry in our small corner of our world we don't realize that we are part of the global village. In our global village we have metropolitan cities and their challenges, but we have also tiny and sometimes not-so-tiny rural communities that have been ravaged and destroyed by their enemies. We have the poor and the rich, the black and the white, the yellow and the red, the persecutor and the persecuted.

In Cape Town I met many fellow-believers who are oppressed and persecuted for their faith. Much of this suffering is caused by greed and the false concept of the superiority of one race over another. This is particularly true in parts of India, in South America and the Middle East. The history of our Jewish people has been marred by the dark ideals of those who paid blind homage to the doctrine that the Aryan race is superior and the Jews, the blacks and the unprivileged gypsies are disgraceful races that ought to be annihilated. As a consequence of Aryan superiority, six million of our people and countless others were murdered in death camps and ghettos, or shot en masse and thrown into cold and forsaken mass graves.

In the Congress we learned of the suffering world and the persecuted church. We saw the inhumane treatment of slaves in India with its elaborate and repressive Caste system. Some three million Indians live as slaves in the 21st century. They exist only to serve their masters and make them rich and happy. The children, the adults and the elderly work however hard as their task masters demand. They are not only enslaved but shackled with steel chains to the inexorable Caste system. Women and children often fall victim to human trafficking and are sold like meat in the market to anyone willing to pay a few dollars for them.

Racism and greed are not the only root causes of suffering and persecution in the world. Many are persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ and because they are fully committed to sharing the love and the light of Christ in this dark, hate-filled world.

A vivid and timely example of this was brought home to us at the opening of the congress when Dr. Doug Birdsall, the Executive Director of the Congress, reported that the Chinese delegation was prohibited by the Chinese authorities from attending. Christianity is growing strong in that part of the world, but Chinese believers are suffering persecution.

But probably the thing that most caught our throats and filled our eyes with tears was the story of an 18-year-old girl from North Korea. She stood before the Congress and told the amazing story of her father who disappeared in North Korea as he resolutely preached the message of salvation to his people. Though he had been imprisoned and warned by the authorities who deported him to South Korea, he was caught back in North Korea after returning to the land of his oppressors yet again. The message of God compelled him to do so. He walked the path of no return. The girl had already lost her mother to cancer four years earlier and now she has lost her father for the sake of the Gospel. But as is often the case the blood of the martyrs are the seed of the church. Following the disappearance and presumed death of her father and having seen his love, dedication and total

commitment to Christ of the Gospel, she embraced her father's faith, though she is not able to live and minister alongside him.

On the day that the Congress was in recess I decided to go to a tour organized by a reconciliation group. We were taken to the District Six museum that shows the dark side of the previous regime in South Africa. District Six was once a colourful residential neighbourhood where blacks and whites lived together. But when the Apartheid regime introduced the law of segregation in the 1970's all coloured residents were forcefully removed, with bulldozers destroying their homes and clearing their land. Thankfully the churches were not flattened, but much of the history and livelihood of the neighbourhood was obliterated. More than 60,000 people were uprooted from their homes and their childhood memories. Today one can tour the neighbourhood to witness what man is capable of.

The day after the Congress ended and before my flight back home, I was able to visit the Jewish and Holocaust Museum. It remains, as do many other such museums all over the world, a memorial to suffering, pain, tears, humiliation and death. The museum in Cape Town may be particularly significant, because it stands in the middle of a city and country that also suffered much as well. The apartheid regime was a dark age in which man forgot that we are all, white and black, red and yellow, created in the image of the one true God who is the creator and sustainer of all things. And that superiority, if there is such a thing, is not determined by the colour of our skin, or by our race.

On a personal level, the privilege of meeting Persian and Arab Christians was a highlight for me. When we pray for the persecuted we should not forget our Iranian brothers and sisters who live under the extreme Islamic regime of Ahmadinejad and his government.

As Jews and Israelis we strive to commemorate the six million of our people who perished in the Holocaust, but we ought to also remember those who are suffering in our world today, particularly our own brethren who are persecuted for the faith. I believe that we can offer the world something of great value if we defend the world's orphans and widows, the sufferers and the persecuted.

I wish to conclude with a quotation from one of the gatherings of the International Institute for Religious Freedom:

"Persecuted Christians have learned truths about God that Christians under less pressure need to hear in order to experience the fullness of God. The spiritual insights of the persecuted are vital to the transformation of the lives of the rest of the Body of Christ. One of these essential insights is that we will all be – if witnessing for Christ – in some sense persecuted. There is a grander, greater narrative of God's action underneath the stories of individual pain, suffering, deliverance, and endurance."¹

In light of these words let us seek to be aware of and sensitive to the persecuted in our world and to pray for them regularly. We know what suffering and loss has meant to us, and because of our own people's history we are in a position to raise awareness of the suffering of others.

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¹ From the short summary of the Bad Urach statement by evangelical leaders who gathered from 16-18 of September 2009 in Bad Urach, Germany. The gathering was organized by the International Institute for Religious Freedom. The summary appeared in the International Journal for Religious Freedom (IJRF) Vol 3, Issue 1 2010, page 108.