RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION
(A&P 2019, p. 284–86, 29)

Religious persecution is present on every continent: the oppression of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar; the killing of Coptic Christian in Egypt; the limitations China places on Buddhists, Muslim Uyghurs, Christians and Falun Gong followers; and the attacks on mosques and synagogues in North America. In December 2018, the British Foreign Ministry launched an investigation of religious persecution around the world, paying particular attention to that faced by Christians, noting the government could do more to help battle the widespread oppression of religious groups (Wintour & Sherwood, 2018). Ensuring the religious freedom of one person, requires protecting the religious freedom of all people.

The 2015 General Assembly addressed the question of religious freedom (A&P 2015, p. 295–302), this year’s report provides a follow up. The International Affairs Committee does this recognizing Canada has not always protected people living in Canada from religious persecution. Vandalism and violence mark the experience of both Jews and Muslims in Canada. Further, Canada and Canadians have acted to limit the religious freedom of other Canadians, as evidenced in the abolition of the potlatch and the suppression of Doukhobor land-holding patterns.

The Pew Charitable Annual Report on Religious Freedom (Pew Research Centre, 2018) delineates two kinds of persecution:

1. Government Restrictions: “laws, policies and actions by officials that restrict religious beliefs and practices”.
2. Social Hostilities: “acts of religious hostility by private individuals, organizations or groups in society.”

Countries may declare religious freedom a constitutional right but social hostility against religious people occurs which governments are unable or unwilling to prevent.

In 2016, 83 countries (42% of the 198 surveyed) were identified as having high or very high restrictions and/or hostilities regarding religion – an increase from 80 countries in 2015 and 58 countries in 2007 (ibid). An estimated 215 million Christians live in the 50 countries with the highest high levels of persecution; that is, one in 12 Christians worldwide (Open Doors USA, 2018). For over 15 years North Korea has topped the list of countries that repress religious groups (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Of the 300,000 to 500,000 Christians living in North Korea, an estimated 50,000 Christians were held in prison or work camps in 2014 (Brandow, 2016).

In The Price of Freedom Denied, Brian Grim and Roger Finke explore the connection between religious freedom and wider human rights. They identify a strong correlation among religious freedom, political freedom and freedom of the press. Countries recognizing one of these human rights are likely to embed all three in their legal/constitutional system. Grim and Finke cite the Hudson Institute’s Centre for Religious Freedom finding “that wherever the level of religious freedom is high, there tends to be fewer incidents of armed conflict, better health outcomes, higher level of earned income, prolonged democracy and better educational opportunities for women.” Grim and Finke conclude the evidence suggests “religious freedom is an integral part of a ‘bundled commodity’ of human freedoms” (Grim & Finke, 2011, p. 206). Guarding the religious freedom of one person supports the freedoms of all people.

FOUR SNAPSHOTs

1. Mexico is the most dangerous country in the world to be a Roman Catholic priest. In the past decade over 50 Catholic priests and members of religious orders have been murdered, generally by drug cartels. Priests are targeted because of their courage in speaking out against violence or to create fear in the communities they serve (Gowen, 2017).

   The Mexican provinces of Chiapas and Oaxaca (in the south-east) and Hidalgo (north of Mexico City) have significant Indigenous populations. Indigenous people who are Pentecostals face a range of social hostilities including having their electricity and water cut off, being removed from the local population registers, having their children blocked from attending school and having their land confiscated (ibid).

2. Elsewhere this report discusses the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar (see p. 274–76). In 2018, members of the Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw, who drove the Rohingya from their homeland,
moved north to Kachin province and began forcing thousands of Kachin, who are predominately Christians, from their homes. In the first six months of 2018, the Tatmadaw drove Kachin people from 50 villages. According to the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), soldiers have destroyed or damaged 400 Kachin villages, 300 churches and 100 schools since 2011. A UN investigation in March 2018 noted “marked similarities” between the violence against the Rohingya and the Kachin, including the use of rape, torture and murder (Williams, 2018).

3. The killing of Copts in Egypt has drawn much attention. Less widely known are the other forms of pressure faced by Coptic Christians in Egypt. In July 2018, an attempt to burn the Coptic Church building in the community of Ezbet Sultan Pasha led to arrests and violence. That summer, in the village of Dimshau Hashim, an attack left four Copts injured. Church members were forced to hold the funeral of an elderly member in the street because the church building had been closed for fear of further attacks (Gavin, 2018).

4. Violence and discrimination against Pakistan’s religious minorities such as Ahmadis, Christians and Hindus have reached a level where many live daily in fear. PWS&D’s partners in Pakistan identify religious persecution as an on-going struggle. The high-profile case of Asia Bibi, an agriculture worker, demonstrates the reasons for this fear. Bibi was arrested in June 2009 after an argument with Muslim co-workers over Bibi’s use of co-workers’ water jug. The co-workers reacted to her touching their jug, considering Christians unclean. A couple of days later, two women approached a local Muslim cleric, accusing Bibi of blasphemy. She was beaten and dragged before the village council. Offered her freedom if she converted to Islam, Bibi refused the option. She was then charged with blasphemy, which under Pakistan Penal Code carries the mandatory death penalty. Finally, in November 2018, nine years after the original charges, Bibi was acquitted by the Supreme Court and released from prison. Riots of protest against the acquittal greeted her release (Mughal, 2018).

HOW MIGHT PRESBYTERIANS RESPOND?

Pray with intelligence. In praying for those whose religious freedom is limited we are invited beyond praying “God, keep them safe” to pray with some knowledge about the situations. Gathering information about persecuted religious groups around the world is relatively easy. Pray in particular for Christian sisters and brothers to have the peace of God which passes understanding, the hope of the Holy Spirit’s presence and to know the love of Christ which is beyond measure.

Write Members of Parliament. Express commitment to religious freedom around the world. Ask the Government of Canada to make religious freedom from government restrictions and social hostility part of the conversation Canadian politicians and diplomats have with their counterparts in other nations. Draw attention to the strong correlation between religious freedom and political freedom and freedom of the press. Gather a group of friends to become a small group committed to writing on behalf of those facing religious persecution. Westminster Church in Barrie, Ontario is doing this as a congregation.

Live with respect for religious freedom in Canada. Religious freedom for one is religious freedom for all. Survey data indicates half of Canadians are uncomfortable with people wearing public signs of their religious convictions – turbans, hijab, niqab, robes, kippah, crosses, etc. Presbyterians support people wearing and living their religious convictions, speaking in support of neighbours who demonstrate their religious convictions and practices in public ways. Ensuring the religious freedom of one person, requires protecting the religious freedom of all people.