

***"Even the traumas we
endure as we seek to serve Christ,
He receives as our worship."***

~ Rev. Dr. Eric Foley, CEO of VOM Korea

ERITREA: Recent Passing of Imprisoned Church Leader

Sources: Release Eritrea, Release International, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, AnglicanTV

Reverend Ghirmay Araya was one of the founders of the Full Gospel Church in Eritrea. Under the country's oppressive regime, the denomination was banned in 2002 and its senior leaders were imprisoned in 2004. Over the decades since, thousands of other Eritreans have been imprisoned for their faith, often enduring torture and inhumane treatment.

Even though semi-retired, Reverend Ghirmay was rearrested in July 2021 and detained without charge at a maximum-security facility in Asmara. It was recently announced that, after spending almost three years in detention, Reverend Ghirmay passed away in prison at the age of 83. It was said that he "endured his suffering with steadfast faith." The pastor leaves behind five children and 13 grandchildren.

One of Reverend Ghirmay's sons, Samuel, has also been imprisoned because of his ministry as a Lutheran pastor. Though the father and son had been detained in the same facility, they were never able to visit one other. Sources also state that prison officials did not inform Samuel of his father's passing. The imprisoned son is presently being held in a metal shipping container – a notoriously inhumane practice where prisoners are forced to suffer extreme desert temperatures and unsanitary conditions.

Dr. Berhane Asmelash from Release Eritrea continues to express concerns about the hundreds of other Christians who are presently imprisoned in the country, some of whom are being held in the same facility where Reverend Ghirmay died. "Many are getting on in age and suffer from various health conditions," he wrote. Most of these detained believers are being held without charge, and some have been in custody for as long as 20 years. For other reports on the persecution of Christians in Eritrea, go to our [country report](#).

Prayerfully uphold the family of this beloved saint as they mourn his passing. May they be wonderfully comforted by the assurance that Reverend Ghirmay is now in the glorious presence of his Saviour. Also pray for greatly needed physical and spiritual fortitude on behalf of his son Samuel and the many other Eritrean followers of Jesus who remain incarcerated because of their faith. May God work mightily in this nation so that Eritrea's governing leaders would end their intense persecution of the country's Christians, release all those who are currently being arbitrarily detained, and put policies into place that will respect the rights of all Eritrean citizens.



Reverend Ghirmay Araya
Photo: Release Eritrea

REPORT UPDATES

PAKISTAN: Pastor Meets with Imprisoned Zafar Bhatti

Source: Church in Chains

Zafar Bhatti has been held in prison for 12 years on allegations of blasphemy. Although initially sentenced to life imprisonment in 2017, the Christian man's punishment was changed to include the death penalty in January 2022. During

his time in prison, Zafar has faced various health issues. Diagnosed with diabetes, he suffered two minor heart attacks in 2019 and another in 2020. For previously published reports on Zafar's case, go to [this page](#).

On May 2nd, a pastor was able to visit Zafar at the Adyala Prison in Rawalpindi. The visiting Christian leader reported that Zafar's health remains a serious concern. Prison doctors have expressed alarm that his heart function is very poor and there are no further treatment options available. Zafar's wife, Nawab, is also in poor health. Blind in one eye, she has developed cataracts in the other. Although cataract surgery is being arranged, she is currently unable to visit her husband in prison.

The detained believer is continuing to appeal his sentence. While a court hearing had been scheduled for May 2nd, no judge was willing to hear his case. Consequently, the appeal session is currently listed as pending, with no set date. According to supporters of Zafar, the Christian man has a strong case, but judges in Pakistan have been unwilling to hear blasphemy appeals due to intimidation and pressure from the public to hand down convictions, regardless of the evidence. Prison authorities have recommended that Zafar appeal for bail on medical grounds, likely to avoid international scrutiny should his condition worsen in prison.

On behalf of Zafar and his lawyers, pray that God will grant them wisdom and guidance as they consider their next steps. May the Lord also intervene in the hearts of Pakistan's judges, in hopes they will be receptive to the Holy Spirit's promptings so that a successful appeal hearing will soon take place – leading to this long-suffering believer's safe release from prison. Please also pray for the health concerns that both Zafar and his wife are experiencing, asking our Heavenly Father to provide for their medical needs and ultimately grant them divine healing.



Zafar Bhatti
Photo: Pakistan Christian Post

MEXICO: Displaced Christians Pressured to Accept Agreement

Source: Christian Solidarity Worldwide

More than 100 members of the Great Commission Baptist Church in Hidalgo State were recently forced from their homes because they refused to participate in their villages' religious festivals. The Christians took refuge in a government building in Huejutla de los Reyes, where they called upon municipal and state authorities to intervene. For more details on this situation, see [this page](#).

On May 15th, Pastor Rogelio Hernández Baltazar and another church leader held a press conference, outlining the efforts that have been made by the municipal government. The church is being asked to accept an agreement in which the village leaders would fine the victims 150,000 pesos (over \$12,000 CAD). The proposal also seeks to ban three of the Christian families from returning to their homes, stating that those who return will be met with the same severe restrictions they had been subjected to over the years. The church leaders expressed that they do not want to accept the proposal, despite being pressured by the government to do so.



A church building in Hidalgo.
Photo: Wikimedia / Frankms ([CC](#))

Those seeking refuge have since moved out of the municipal building to another location in the city, where they are completely dependent on humanitarian aid from local churches. The number of displaced church members has grown to include over 150 people, as individuals who had been working outside their villages at the time of the displacement were refused entry when they tried to return home.

During this time of uncertainty, may God's peace, comfort and courage rest on these displaced believers. While continuing to meet their daily needs through the provision of local churches, may the Lord also miraculously transform the hearts of the opposing village leaders so that a reasonable resolution will soon be achieved. Additionally, pray that the governing municipal and state authorities would also realize the injustice of the situation and take necessary action to prevent this vulnerable Christian community from encountering further harassment and abuse.

IRAN: Detained Christian Convert Released on Bail

Sources: Open Doors Canada, Church in Chains

Christian convert Esmail Narimanpour was detained at his home on Christmas Eve in 2023. When his family members attempted to inquire about his situation, they were subjected to interrogation by security forces for several hours. For more details on this incident, go to [this page](#).

It has since been reported that Esmail was charged with "acting against national security by communicating with Christian 'Zionist' organizations." After more than four months in detention, during which time the believer had been primarily held in Ahvaz's Shiban Prison, Esmail was released on bail as of April 30th. No further details about the Christian man's case are available at the time of publishing this report.



Esmail Narimanpour
Photo: Article 18

Praise God that Esmail has been granted bail. Pray that all legal matters will be fully resolved and that the Lord will shield him from any further persecution by the Iranian authorities. In addition, please intercede for the citizens of Iran as they face upheaval following the recent accidental death of President Ebrahim Raisi. While this situation alone may not bring about needed change for our Iranian brothers and sisters in Christ, may those in power – including Ayatollah Khamenei – receive a divine revelation of the Lord's sacrificial love for humanity and thereby acknowledge the need for His compassion and righteousness to be extended to all people.

The "Persecution & Prayer Alert" is a ministry of:
Voice of the Martyrs Canada, P.O. Box 608, Streetsville, Ontario, L5M 2C1
Tel. (905) 670-9721 Website: www.vomcanada.com