



MEN OF GOD

The remarkable testimonies of four pastors in Laos

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witness



FAITH, LOVE AND POWER

LAOS

PASTORS UNDER PRESSURE



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Pastor Andrew (left) and Pastor John (right) are two men of God in Laos who have been persecuted because of their Christian faith.

FAITH, LOVE AND POWER

Being a pastor in Laos is dangerous work. There are spies in every village and Christians are under surveillance. Four pastors who were jailed for preaching the gospel have been telling **Andrew Boyd** their testimonies, which are filled with faith, love and power. All names have been changed. Photos: Crossfire

The four pastors stood in the shade of the palm tree, shielded from the blazing Lao heat, singing songs of praise to God who had delivered them.

It had been in their power to deliver themselves - from the leg irons and chains, from their stifling cells - and from their constant beatings. To end it, all they had to do was stop sharing their faith. *Just sign the paper and you can go...*

It was sharing their faith that had got these pastors into trouble. But they were not looking for an easy way out. Instead, they would wait for the Lord their deliverer.

A Release International team travelled to the communist nation of Laos to discover the reality facing underground believers who refuse to keep quiet about Jesus. For some it has meant murder. For others intimidation and jail without trial - in medieval conditions.

Pastor Andrew spent his sentence with his feet clamped in stocks, chained in a row to the other prisoners. His 'crime'? Bringing foreign religions to this largely Buddhist country.

**'THE JAIL WAS A
VERY SMALL,
DARK ROOM WITH
NO AIR'** Pastor Andrew

The prisoners were shackled and forced to defecate where they lay. *The jail was a very small, dark room with no air,* says Andrew. *There was a very*

bad smell because it was like a toilet. And when we lay down we could not sleep.

'They asked me to sign a paper that said that I would not be a Christian - because Christians are not good and not right for the Lao people. I didn't sign it because of my faith.'

FAITH

Instead, Pastor Andrew used the opportunity to share that faith with the other prisoners. Five of the eight gave their lives to Jesus. When the guards found out, they almost killed him.

'They said I was paying money to people to become Christians and be against the government. I said, "No, I didn't do that. And it is not against the government."

The guards kept up their savage beating until his life was hanging by a thread. Today his memory is permanently dulled by that kicking to the head. When asked about the Bible verses that comfort him, he replies: *'I cannot remember. I forget whatever I read.'*

Laos embraced communism when its North Vietnamese neighbour defeated America in 1975 to unite the country under the hammer and sickle. And like Vietnam, the authorities suspect the United States could be supporting Christians to continue that campaign against communism.

Andrew, who is in his 50s, has been jailed three times for sharing Jesus. He used to be an animist - one who believed in the spirit world. When ten of his 15 children died, he was convinced they had been killed by spirits. But after a Christian pastor prayed for his family the sickness and the dying stopped. So Andrew became a Christian.

Continues overleaf



► Lao soldiers march past the parliament building in the capital Vientiane, as part of a mass rally to celebrate National Day. The communist regime is deeply suspicious of Christianity – some Christians have been forced at gunpoint to renounce their faith.

Photo: Reuters/Sukree Sukplang.

ANDREW PRAYS FOR THE SICK AND THEY GET BETTER. THEY SEEK HIM OUT AND ASK HIM ABOUT JESUS.

Now Andrew prays for the sick and they get better. They seek him out and ask him about Jesus.

As more became Christians the police moved in.

In 2002 they arrested Andrew for bringing foreign religions to Laos and jailed him for 45 days.

But that backfired as Andrew led many of his cellmates to Christ. And when they finally let him go he led 250 other Lao people to faith in Jesus. *'Many are seeing that Jesus is the true God and want to become Christians,'* he says.

So they jailed him for the third time in 2004, warning that he would die unless he renounced his faith. But that hasn't deterred him. Today Andrew travels on foot to care for a string of house churches with hundreds of members.

He does so with caution, as the government requires the village leader to report anything suspicious. He often travels by night to avoid their watchful gaze.



Another village spy was watching as a stranger came to share his faith. The fourth time evangelist Silas showed up the police were waiting for him. They threw him in jail without trial.

LOVE

Silas says many Lao people are scared to become Christians for fear of the authorities. *'For me, I am not afraid,'* he says, *'because I have faced up to this. If the Lord wants me to go through that experience again I will obey Him.'*

'The Lord loves me so much that he sacrificed Himself on the cross for me. Whatever I do cannot compare. I love Him. I just want to serve Him better and to serve others.'

It was the same story for evangelist Stephen when the village head man – perhaps sensing a challenge to his authority – called for his arrest.

Like the others Stephen was jailed without trial and thrown into a cell as hot as an oven. *'I could not breathe because of the smell,'* he says. *'It was like a toilet. The police put my feet in stocks and chains on my hands and I couldn't move.'*

And there, like the Apostle Paul before him, he shared his faith with the other prisoners in chains in simplicity and power.

'I said I knew that I was a sinner, but that Jesus loved sinners. I asked them: 'Do you think you are sinners?' They said "Yes". So I asked, "Do you want God to help you?" They said "Yes". So I shared with them, and they accepted Christ.'

'MANY LAO PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW JESUS AND WANT TO BE FORGIVEN BY GOD.' Pastor Stephen

'Many Lao people want to know Jesus and want to be forgiven by God.'

So Stephen will keep telling them about Jesus, whatever that means for him. *'I'm never afraid. I know God will guide and protect me. I trust in Him.'*

The fourth man who stands in the shade of the garden today reads from the Bible to encourage the others. He has just spent more than a year in jail for what few would consider a crime. His offence was to stage a church party – a party to which the police and local officials were invited.

Continues overleaf

◀ Jailed without trial in Laos for sharing his Christian faith – evangelist Silas.



► Pastor Stephen was jailed without trial and put in stocks for sharing his faith in Christ in Laos.

Pastor John leads nine churches with 5,000 members. His first taste of jail came in 2001, when the persecution was particularly bad.

He says: *'They wanted to force me to stop believing in Jesus. They tried to get me to sign a paper saying that from now on I am not a Christian and I will not bring people to church. But I refused.'*

They let him go after partners of Release International campaigned for his freedom. But in 2006 he organised an Easter thanksgiving party in the village, inviting the village head and the police as guests.

The authorities joined in the party and listened while the pastors shared their testimonies. Then they seized the passports of foreign visitors and jailed three pastors and six elders for holding an illegal gathering.



► *'Pray for the brave Christians of Laos, that God would strengthen them, increase their faith and the power of their witness,'* says Release's CEO Andy Dipper. *'And pray that the communist government would realise that Christians who love God will serve their nation too.'*

POWER

But like the others John saw his spell behind bars as an opportunity. *'I thank God that He blessed me in jail,'* he says. *'I was there not because I had done anything wrong, but because I believe in Jesus. I shared Christ and prayed for the prisoners. 24 believed in Jesus. Many were healed.'*

The food and water were so bad in jail that many of the prisoners became ill. One almost died from gastric sickness. *'I said that if you trust in the Lord you will be healed.'* He laid his hands on the sick prisoner and the man recovered. The prison guards were impressed and treated him with more respect.

But more than a year in jail took its toll. John has pain in his kidneys because of the foul water given him to drink.

Many former prisoners are ill when they get out of jail. Release International has helped them with much-needed medical care. Release is also supporting the families of prisoners of faith in Laos and enabling wives to visit their husbands in jail.

'SERVING GOD IS THE BEST THING WE CAN DO ON EARTH.' Pastor John



Pastor John: 24 prisoners came to Christ during his time in jail.



◀ The communist government of Laos actively encourages Buddhism – which claims 43 per cent of the population. Christians, who number just under 3 per cent, are seen as a threat to national unity, and are persecuted by the government.

'Serving God is the best thing we can do on earth,' says John. 'I thank God that He loves me so much and helps me, I want to serve Him all my life and share the gospel with those who don't know His love. I think the Lord allows some persecution for me, but I will obey God and trust Him for whatever He brings.'

'Please pray for the other pastors and leaders in Laos that he will give us more strength and opportunity.'

PLEASE PRAY

'What a testimony!' says Release International's CEO Andy Dipper. 'Pray for the brave Christians of Laos, that God would strengthen them, increase their faith and the power of their witness. And pray that the communist government would realise that Christians who love God will serve their nation too.'

PLEASE GIVE

Release counts it a privilege to stand alongside courageous men of God such as Andrew, John, Silas and Stephen in Laos. Release provides encouragement, pastoral care and practical support to persecuted Christians around the world. To support this vital ministry of supporting our wider church family, please use the coupon on the back page of this magazine.

To read about the latest news of the persecuted church, please visit our website www.releaseinternational.org.



Hmong children in Laos. In February 2008 nine Hmong church leaders were sentenced to 15 years each in jail because their ministries had grown 'beyond acceptable levels'. Photo: Reuters/Sukree Sukplang.

LAOS



Population: 6.5 million

Capital: Vientiane

Government: Communist state

Religion: Ethnoreligionist 49%; Buddhist 43%; Christian 2.8%

COMMUNIST VESTIGE

Laos is one of the last remaining communist states and as such has struggled to find its place in today's world.

After six centuries of having a monarchy, Laos fell to communist forces in 1975 and the communist Pathet Lao guerrillas seized power.

The end of the Soviet empire left Laos politically isolated and it began engaging with the international community from the 1990s onwards.

Yet, despite economic reform and liberalisation, Laos still has only one legal political party – the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. The government maintains a tight grip on society and regularly

tramples on religious rights.

Laos remains one of the world's least developed nations, widely covered by tropical forest.

DOUBLE-SPEAK

The Laotian constitution provides for religious freedom yet its authoritarian regime maintains firm control over all religious activity.

The constitution likewise bans religious persecution – and yet it is the government itself which organises harassment of religious minorities.

At a general level, religious groups must gain state approval for such things as evangelism, printing religious literature, and owning or building places of worship. Foreign evangelists and foreign religious literature are not even allowed through customs.

At a more personal level, Christians report having been forced at gunpoint to renounce their faith. Others have been put in prison without trial or had their property seized.

SEDITIONARY FAITH

The state openly encourages Buddhism and Buddhist organisations: Christianity is seen as a threat to national unity.

So Christians refusing to take part in state-organised religious events are seen as seditious; evangelists have been charged with treason.

The government recognises only three churches: the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, even some of these churches have been oppressed.

Between 1999 and 2001, the authorities shut down at least 85 LEC churches across the country. A thaw in the government's relations with the church in recent years has seen many of the churches which had been closed being reopened.

But persecution continues. The government found itself a new target in 2005 in the form of the Bru tribal Christians in the south of Savannakhet province. In one raid, believers were reportedly tied to posts and tortured with red ants to make them recant their faith.

RI PROJECTS

RI's work in Laos includes:

- Supporting negotiations which resulted in the release of three teenage North Korean refugees from the custody of the Laotian authorities; support for Christian prisoners and their families.

The World Christian Database uses Ethnoreligionist as a collective term for primal or primitive animists, spirit-worshippers, shamanists, pantheists, fetishists etc usually confined to a single tribe or people.

Sources: BBC; International Christian Concern; Operation World; Release International; The World Factbook 2007; World Christian Database

NEW RESOURCES FOR YOU
AND YOUR CHURCH

GET READY

FOR THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER 2008

Sunday November 16 2008 is the day designated as the International Day of Prayer (IDOP) for the persecuted church. Thousands of churches around the world make use of this special day to pray for persecuted Christians – so please join in!

Please talk to your church leadership now, and ask them to use your church meetings on Sunday November 16 to pray for the persecuted church. Thank you!

We're preparing a new set of resources, *Pray for Pakistan*, which can be used as part of a church service, prayer meeting or small group (eg Bible study or home group). The new DVD package includes:

Pray for Pakistan DVD:

Meet some of Release's partners in Pakistan, and the persecuted Christians helped by your support. Christians in Pakistan are a persecuted minority, who are treated as second-class citizens, facing discrimination at work, in education and in the legal system. Pakistan's infamous 295C blasphemy laws continue to be used abusively against Christians – and Christian women face particular dangers, owing to their

low social and legal status. This new DVD encourages prayer and action for persecuted believers – please make sure you order a copy to share with your church.

Pray for Pakistan Powerpoint. This short PowerPoint presentation is designed to be used alongside the DVD, to help you organise your own prayer event in your small group or church. Includes specific prayer points for Pakistan, and printable script with guidance notes.

The new *Pray for Pakistan* resources will be available at the end of August, and may be ordered in the next edition of *Witness* magazine.

Thank you.

OUR NEW DVD GIVES YOU EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO ORGANISE YOUR OWN PRAYER EVENT

40th ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL EVENTS

2008 is Release's 40th anniversary! To mark this, we will be holding Saturday evening celebrations in three cities, one of which we hope will be convenient for you:

London October 25

Belfast November 1

Glasgow November 8

Each event will feature the screening of a new film we are producing, and many other interesting and encouraging elements. Each evening will also give you the opportunity to meet other supporters, members of staff and members of our Board of Trustees.

Please note the appropriate date in your diary. Our next anniversary celebrations won't be until 2018 - so don't miss out this year! Admission is by free ticket, to ensure we guarantee your seat. Further details in the next edition of *Witness*.

▲ Meena features in our new DVD *Pray for Pakistan*. Her husband Younis was beaten by a Muslim mob, tortured by the police, falsely accused of blasphemy, and given the death sentence, without any proper investigation. He has been jailed since the end of 2005. Meena, Younis and their family need your prayers.