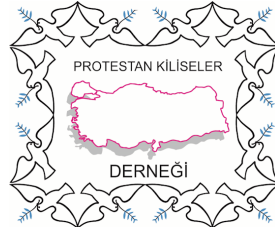


# 2022 Human Rights Violations Report

*Prepared by*  
**Protestant Church Association**

**22.06.2022**



## Introduction, Background and Summary

We respectfully submit to the public this year's Human Rights Violation Report. Such reports have been prepared annually for many years from the perspective of the Protestant Community in Turkey. Due to the earthquake and the involvement of the church and church personnel in serving those affected by the quake, we apologize for this report being submitted later than expected this year.

You will primarily find the following in this report:

- A summary of current historical and sociological information for those who do not know the situation of Protestants in Turkey
- The purpose of this report
- Summary information regarding the areas examined by the report
- More detailed information regarding the areas focused on by the report

## Background

The Protestant community in Turkey is made up of over 186 fellowships of various sizes, the majority of which are found in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir.<sup>1</sup>

Protestant fellowships have 119 legal entities by establishing 13 religious foundations, 20 representative branches of religious foundations, 33 church associations and 53 representative branches linked to those associations. The remaining fellowships do not possess legal entity status. Approximately 16 of these are house fellowships<sup>2</sup>. 6 fellowships meet in offices. Approximately 13 Protestant churches meet in historical church buildings. The remaining fellowships that do not have legal entity status use their own or rented public spaces.

In 2022, as in previous years, the Protestant community did not have the opportunity to train its own religious personnel within the Turkish National Education system. Therefore, the Protestant community trains most of its religious leaders through its own internal apprenticeship method or through on-line courses or other on-line education materials. A small percentage obtain education at theology schools abroad, while others can gain the necessary knowledge and skills for pastoral leadership through seminars organized within country. In recent years, although there has been a large increase in the number of national Protestant religious workers, there have not been enough of these leaders to meet the need; therefore, the spiritual leadership of some churches is provided by foreign pastors (Protestant spiritual leaders). Just like in 2021, there were serious issues in some Protestant churches in 2022 because of various codes given to foreign religious workers. This started in a heavy way in 2019, continued in 2020 and in 2021, even though the amount of people getting codes decreased. In 2022 since almost all the very important foreign religious workers had already been banned from entrance into Turkey, there was not a new case recorded but Ç-152 was begun to be given. In addition, by giving N82 and G 87 codes, entrance to Turkey was hindered or by refusing to give visas or residence permits foreign workers were forced to leave Turkey. This leaves their churches to which they gave spiritual leadership in the difficult situation described above.

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<sup>1</sup> This number describes the number of churches whose worship language is Turkish. Even though the true number is not known, especially Iranian refugee churches, there are close to 100 other churches in Turkey who worship in different languages.

<sup>2</sup> House fellowships is a term used to describe groups that do not have any public appearance; members of the congregation meet regularly in homes.

Protestant churches do not have a hierarchical or centralized structure. Each church is independent. However, church pastors began meeting together in the late 1980's for the purpose of unity, solidarity, and partnership between Protestant churches. In the mid 90's this unity gained structural momentum, so they formed "The Alliance of Protestant Churches", known as TeK (Representative Committee). Earlier laws pertaining to the formation of associations prevented TeK from being a representative body before official government bodies. As the result of a change in the Law of Associations, TeK decided to establish an association and the Protestant Church Association was formed on Jan 23, 2009. The Association of Protestant Churches continues to act as the representative and unifying institution for a large part of the Protestant community in Turkey.

Since 2007 the Association of Protestant Churches has published these monitoring reports<sup>3</sup> which explain the Protestant community's situation. The Association of Protestant Churches attaches great importance to freedom of religion and belief and strives to ensure these freedoms become a reality for everyone, everywhere. These yearly monitoring reports serve to put forth the Protestant community's situation and to share that with public officials, civil society, and the press.

## Summary

Freedom of religion and belief is secured under both national and international laws and the constitutional authority in our country as one of the basic rights found in national and international laws, as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Generally, there is freedom of religion in our country but despite legal protections, there were still some basic problems that continued for the Protestant community in 2022. With the aim of contributing to the development of freedom of belief in Turkey, this report has been prepared to present some of the experiences, problems as well as positive developments that have been experienced in 2022<sup>4</sup> by the Protestant community relating to religious freedom.<sup>5</sup> The situation in 2022 is summarized below:

- Because of the isolation in 2021 due to the pandemic, there were no physical attacks against Protestant Christians, either individuals or institutions, because of hate of their faith; in 2022 these attacks began to occur again.
- In 2022, hate against Protestant Christians, based on hatred of beliefs of individuals or institutions, expressed verbally or in writing, along with hate speech which provokes hate in the public increased from the previous year.
- In 2022, problems continued to be faced regarding requests to establish a sole place of worship, to continue using a facility for worship, or with applications to use existing church buildings.
- In 2022, the trend for churches to gain legal status through the establishment of a religious foundation continued to strengthen.

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<sup>3</sup> Before the year 2009 the expression "unity" was used. [http://www.protestankiliseler.org/?page\\_id=638](http://www.protestankiliseler.org/?page_id=638)

<sup>4</sup> Normally these reports are prepared and published in the following year in the month of February. But the earthquake of Feb 6 led churches and church leaders to the earthquake zone to help serve. For that reason, the 2022 report is published in June.

<sup>5</sup> Our community defends freedom of belief for all; this right includes the freedom to not believe.

- There was no progress regarding the rights of Christians to train their own religious workers. Many foreign church leaders were deported, were denied entry into Turkey, or faced problems with getting their residence permits renewed. The increase in foreign currency rates made it difficult to send students to foreign theological schools.

## Hate Crimes and Speech, Verbal, and Physical Attacks

The following physical attacks against the Protestant community were reported to us in 2022:

- Feb 10, 2022: a church leader in İstanbul was stabbed by a neighbor. The leader who was stabbed in the back and the neck was released after surgery.
- The sign of the Şanlıurfa church had the writing on the sign damaged as well as receiving several other marks from a cutting instrument on that sign.
- The children of the pastor of Şanlıurfa church were attacked physically and verbally in school. Their 14-year-old high school freshman was forced to leave school after the attack. After the attack the family reported that they were afraid to leave their home for 15 days. The leader's 12-year-old middle school son was threatened by his friend: "Tell your father to pray, you are my friend or I would break your car's glass and take the cross hanging from the mirror."

In 2022 there was an increase in hate speech compared to the previous year.

- Jan 1, 2022 the Anatolia Protestant church in Kadıköy, İstanbul had their door spray painted with the phrase: "Allah 1." The suspect who was detained, after he gave his statement at the police station, was released by the order of the prosecutor.<sup>6</sup>
- Şanlıurfa Church: A wedding salon owner, who was approached about using his venue for a Christmas celebration, refused to grant the request, saying "I will not give my place to Christians, that is a sin, forbidden." Other large meeting room places like the wedding salon were too far away and so the church was forced to hold its Christmas celebration in a café.
- June 21, 2022: 3 people who were visiting the Diyarbakır Protestant Church in the Sur district were approached at the church entrance by two people wearing caps and shalwar. They had been watching the church and claimed they were from Hezbollah. They showed a gun and threatened to kill them. Those threatened made a complaint at the local police station; afterwards, because of their need for security, they left Diyarbakır.<sup>7</sup>
- Sept 8, 2022: Salvation Church's Malatya Representative Vedat Serin went to the Turkish Republic Prosecutor's office with a statement about a crime. He told of plans to attack the church building, himself, Salvation Church Association Senior Pastor İhsan Özbek and church worker Timothy Wesley Stone who had lived in Malatya previously. He stated he learned of these

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/kadikoyde-kilise-kapisina-allah-1-yazisi-supheli-serbest-birakildi-1896999>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.diken.com.tr/hizbullahcilarin-tehdit-ettigi-yurttaslar-kenti-terk-etti-polis-gaspci-diye-anlatti/>

plans for these attacks from information from the individual who was going to be used in the attacks.<sup>8</sup>

- Christian content on some YouTube channels, Instagram and Twitter accounts have begun to receive systematic and increasing number of curses, insults, and demeaning interpretations. Social media organizations have labeled this “freedom of expression” and have not removed it.

In 2022, there continued to be offers made to members of the Protestant community as well as those who are not Christians but work for Christian organizations to be informants. In many cities where Protestant congregations are found it was reported that offers to become informants to local and refugee Christians from people claiming to be intelligence officers who used threats, promises, benefits or money to gain information about Christians, churches, church activities and Christian organizations.

Several previous attempts to engage members of the Kayseri Protestant Church as agents or informants were repeated this year toward new members. The individual who was given the offer accepted it and slanderously reported the Kayseri Protestant Church as giving incriminating sermons against the government and our country. In order to investigate these claims, instead of coming during business hours during the week, security officials came to church just as worship was starting, creating great consternation among the members. The person whose identity was discovered later reported that the offer was made in order to obtain reasons to shut down the association.

Protestant churches and organizations are public structures and are careful to follow principles of transparency, compliance to law and accountability to international legal frameworks. Most churches have been organized under a legal entity framework and are open to examination by various institutions. Therefore, these types of suspicious and non-transparent incidents draw our attention. When seen considering the damage and pain that comes from these types of activities in our country’s past, this creates concern in the church community.

## **Problems with places of worship**

The right to establish and maintain a place of worship is an important component of the freedom of religion and belief.

Because members of the Protestant community are mostly new Christians, they do not have religious buildings that are part of their cultural and religious heritage like traditional Christian communities have in Turkey. The usable number of historical church buildings is very limited. Therefore, a large portion of the Protestant community tries to overcome the problem of finding a place to worship by establishing an association or religious foundation or gaining representative status with an existing association or religious foundation and then renting or purchasing a property such as a building not considered a “classic” church structure, a stand-alone building, shop, or depot that has not traditionally been used for worship. A very small number have been able to build their own free-standing buildings. However, many of these premises do not have official status as a place of worship and therefore they are not officially recognized as a place of worship even though they are used that way. They cannot benefit from the advantages, or the conveniences given to an officially recognized place of worship such as free electric and water as well as tax exemption. When they

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<sup>8</sup> <https://haber.sat7turk.com/malatya-kilisesi-yine-hedefte/>

publicly introduce themselves as a church, they receive warnings that they are not legal and may be closed.

As of the end of 2022, the situation regarding the use of places of worship by the Protestant community is as follows:

The known number of Protestant congregations in all of Turkey is 186. Looking at their use of worship sites we see the following.

- The number of congregations with their own stand alone or independent building (in the name of an individual or legal entity) is (Previous figure was 19)
- The number of congregations who worship in their own building that is not stand alone or independent (in the name of an individual or a legal entity) is 30. (Previous figure was 35)
- The number of congregations who worship in a traditional church building is 12. (Previous figure was 11)
- The number of congregations who worship in a rented property is 107. (Previous figure was 99)
- The number of congregations who worship in a home or office is 16. (Previous figure was 21)
- There was on group that worshipped in a chapel; that group no longer exists.

When one considers the number of house fellowships as well as those who use rental properties it is easy to see how important and fragile an issue the place of worship is for the Protestant community.

The continually growing Protestant community continued to face a serious problem in 2022 regarding place of worship. Considering the Şanlıurfa church example listed above, especially in smaller communities where there has not been a Christian presence in the recent past or where there is no Christian place of worship, Protestant community members are confronted with serious and very visible social pressure. Instead of public institutions adding to this pressure, it would be more befitting for these institutions to take a role of protection and easing the burden of these small Christian congregations considering human rights and the state's basic responsibilities.

### **The Right to Propagate Religion**

There were no violations of this right in 2022. But provocative news about New Testament distribution, which permission had been granted by the governor's office, was published in local and national newspapers, and was announced as a right that Christians do not have. Instead, this activity was listed as "missionary activity" and described as 'divisive and destructive.'

### **Problems in Education and Obligatory Religion Class**

In 2022 there was no report of violation of education rights being limited. But the developing incidents in Şanlıurfa forced the high school son of the church leader to leave school. The hate speech and discrimination that they faced in school made the other kids unwilling to go to school.

Despite local courts and AIHM (European High Court of Human Rights) decisions that the Obligatory Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge Lessons were against secularism, freedom of religion and scientific education and needed to be stopped, the lessons continued to be applied.<sup>9</sup>

The present form of the Obligatory Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge Lessons content and sources that were used are far from pluralism, the sections on Christianity reflect an Islamic perspective and Christian views are not represented.

## **The Problem of Not being able to Train Religious Workers and the problem of Foreign Protestants**

In 2022, the existing laws in Turkey continued to deny the possibility of training Christian clergy and the opening of schools to provide religious education for the members of church communities in any way. Yet the right to train and develop religious leaders is one of the foundation stones of freedom of religion and belief. The Protestant community presently solves this issue by providing apprentice training, giving seminars within Turkey, sending students abroad or utilizing the support of foreign clergy.

In 2022, although most of the congregations' spiritual leadership was done by local Christians, the need for foreign religious workers continues. Even though the numbers decreased in 2022 in comparison to previous years, cases of deportation of foreign religious workers and members of congregations, refusal to give entrance to Turkey or denied residence permits and visas continued. Many congregations were left in difficult straits and the need for religious workers continues to be great. The need for religious leadership continues at a serious rate.

So far, a total of 185 people has received and code and have been prevented from entering Turkey. Many of these people and their families have lived with residence status in Turkey for years. There was no crime, investigation, or criminal decision against them. There is a significant human problem here. One member of a family is given an unannounced entry ban and a family is ruined and all the members of a family are face to face with chaos.

Nearly all these individuals received an N-82 code (which links entry to Turkey to a prior approval process). When the authorities who issued these codes give their explanation to the court, they state that the N-82 restriction is not an entry ban, it is simply a requirement to obtain prior approval. However, in practice, all of those who have fallen victim to this situation and applied for a visa have had those applications rejected. Although the N-82 is not an entry ban de jure it is a de facto entry ban in Turkey.

A small number of these people received the G-87 code (people who are thought to pose a general security threat). In other countries this code is used for those who participate in armed activities, terrorist organizations or people who participate in demonstrations. It has deeply wounded us and the code is being given without any evidence to members of the Protestant community who are focused on living their faith, who are opposed to violence and who do not have criminal records. These people have been given entry bans for at least 5 years.

In 2022 there was an additional code that was given: Ç-152 is an entrance ban or a form of hindrance. Those that received this code were given an entrance ban of 1 year.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.hukukihaber.net/egitim/mahkeme-zorunlu-din-dersinden-muafiyet-sartini-hukuka-aykiri-buldu-h344451.html>

In court cases opened to challenge this situation, the authorities have claimed that these people are pursuing activities to the detriment of Turkey, have taken part in missionary activities and that some of them had attended our Family Conference which our Association has held annually for twenty years or other seminars and meetings that are similarly completely legal and transparent.

Because the folders involved are kept totally secret, the victims never learn what they have been accused of during the internal legal process. Some of the court cases have been decided and the decisions are made against these people, without giving or showing any reason, evidence, knowledge, or document. The administrative courts accept as data National Intelligence Organization's reports which never make it into the folders and reject the court case on that basis. Foreign Protestants were unable to use their right of self-defense. Very few court cases have had positive decisions. But the administrative decisions are persistently not applied, and codes or visa denials are issued again; this causing the whole litigation process to start from the beginning and the capricious applications of bureaucracy ruin any hope people might have. Cases resulting in decisions against people have been objected to in the Constitutional Court. Some of those cases there have received negative results and those cases have been taken to European High Court of Human Rights (AIHM). Most of those affected by all of this are still during internal legal processes. A significant number of court cases await decisions either at Constitutional Court or at AIHM.

Our hope is that these issues which have no legal justification and are contrary to human rights will find a just solution at the Constitutional Court. But so far only one person has had their residence permit restored. Along with these code related court cases there are 4 people who are married to a Turkish citizen who have had their time for citizenship fulfilled and yet their application for citizenship has been rejected.

Our Association respects our country's sovereign rights, that is, the right to decide who can and cannot be within the country's borders, but at the same time we view this action as being applied solely because these people are Christian which is a grave violation of rights and discriminatory. In addition, the foreign Protestant community lives with the worry that they could be deported at any time. Therefore, some individuals or families do not participate in church meetings and activities or voluntarily have left our country. But because there are no accurate records kept concerning those who have left, that information has not made it into this report.

## **Legal Entity / Right to Organize**

The lack of Legal Entity is a problem for all religious groups in Turkey, but especially for minority groups. The Protestant community has tried to solve this issue mostly by establishing associations and religious foundations or becoming a representative of an existing association or foundation.

As of 2022, members of the Protestant church community have established 13 religious foundations, 20 representative branches of foundations, 33 church associations and 53 representative branches connected to these associations. Thus 119 fellowships have legal status. The remaining fellowships do not possess any form of legal entity. This trend towards gaining legal entity continues. However, associations and foundations are not accepted officially as a "church" or a "place of worship." The problem of a religious congregation becoming a legal entity has not been completely solved. The present legal path does not allow for a congregation to obtain a legal identity as a "religious congregation." In addition, for small churches, the present path to "forming an association"



appears complex and hard to implement. Furthermore, the cost of establishing a foundation is prohibitive and the legal procedure is long, making it hard for small fellowships to gain legal entity status. Small congregations try to resolve this problem through becoming a representative branch of an existing church association or religious foundation.

Since permission has been granted to establish foundations, the trend in recent years is for churches to become religious foundations.

### **Obligatory Declaration of Faith**

The Şanlıurfa church leader and family have faced problems in school and neighborhood, often he or the children are being asked "Are you a Christian?" "Is your father a pastor?"

The requirement to declare one's faith to be exempt from Obligatory Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge classes, or even to prove this faith, continues to be a violation of human rights. Decisions taken by the European High Court of Human Rights Court and local courts need to be implemented for this problem to be solved.<sup>10</sup>

### **Media**

One of the significant problems facing the Protestant church community is the increase of hate speech because of the increased use of social media in our society. Due to increased time spent on the internet and social media because of the pandemic, there has been a noticeable increase in hate speech filled with insult and profanity directed at official church accounts, church leaders, Christianity, Christian values and Christians in general originating from the activity of social media groups that cultivate hatred against Christians and have targeted Christian websites and social media accounts.

Whether the targets are official church accounts or church leaders and members or general Christianity, hate speech, profanity and insults have increased at an alarming rate.

Social media has become the center of targeting, marginalization, degradation, and all kinds of discrimination and has also become the media where corruption of information is the highest. Hate speech easily finds an arena in this platform.

These types of activities directed at all Christian denominations and minority groups creates concern in the Protestant community.

In the wider media and national internet media hate speech has continued to decrease. But research now clearly shows that people's tendencies in obtaining news has changed and people are reading websites and social media rather than classic news outlets.

In 2022 there was an increase in removal of hate speech by social media organizations in line with our call to them in the 2021 report.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hukukihaber.net/egitim/mahkeme-zorunlu-din-dersinden-muafiyet-sartini-hukuka-aykiri-buldu-h344451.html>

## Dialogue

In 2022, the Protestant community representatives were not invited to participate in meetings of religious groups organized by the Government or by official organizations. This shows that there is still a tendency to discount or ignore the presence of the Turkish Protestant community.

During 2022 there was close communication with several municipalities. However, we desire to have a comprehensive level of communication with all public offices and institutions.

The Protestant community continues to attach great importance to the development of relationships with all public institutions, especially the Government, Parliament and municipalities.

## Recommendations

- The government or public institutions being in dialogue with our church community regarding their efforts on issues that concern the Protestant community as well as officially inviting representatives from the Protestant community to meetings would all help in solving problems and overcoming prejudice. Experience in this area shows that when the channels of communication are open, many problems are quickly solved.
- Hate speech directed at Christians has seen an increase in 2022 in comparison to the previous year. Even though complaints were registered, perpetrators being released without penalty or punishment is a source of concern and distrust. An important step toward a solution for this would be updating present laws in a way that is not open to interpretation as well as legal arrangements that would include clear statements that are not open to interpretation regarding hate speech and hate crimes. Public programs that are prepared and broadcast to raise awareness of the issue and educate the public concerning hate speech and hate crimes would create a paradigm shift in the education and cultural awareness of the public.
- The issue of establishing places of worship for the Protestant communities which do not possess historical church buildings has been a problem for years and has not been solved. This basic right of religious expression retains its relevance as a problematic issue. Immediate steps need to be taken by central and local authorities on this matter. Christians need to have the opportunity to open small places of worship (chapels) made available to them, like the masjid concept. Municipalities, the Ministry of Culture, the Directorate General of Foundations, and other government institutions that own church buildings but use them for other purposes should at the very least allow congregations to use the buildings for Sunday and religious holiday worship services. Where issues such as providing land for building of places of worship are concerned, officials should have an attitude that makes the process easier.
- Considering the problems faced by church associations, their right to gather for religious purposes, worship and to propagate religion should be secured.
- Within the framework of human rights education, relevant public officials should be trained in freedom of religion and conscience issues.

- Open channels of communication should be established rather than using informants.
- In the light of the risk of stigmatization and social pressure faced by Christian families and students, the Ministry of Education is expected to proactively inform schools regarding non-Muslims' rights in schools and classrooms, as well as the issue of exemption from religion classes without waiting for the families to complain. Steps beyond wishful thinking should be taken for the development of a culture based on coexistence and respect for beliefs, and its implementation should be monitored.
- The requirement of the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge class should be repealed, people should be freed from the requirement to declare their faith.
- Even if the mandatory Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge class requirement is not repealed, then exemption should be based on an individual's self-declaration.
- Central and local government officials, especially through the Ministry of Education, need to actively place on the agenda and encourage the idea of a shared culture where understanding is shown to people of other religions and where these people are recognized as citizens of the Republic of Turkey with equal rights.
- Within the framework of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, there needs to be an effective and rapid oversight mechanism established regarding intolerance in the media, which can deal with visual and written publications using hate speech, inciteful rhetoric and prejudice. Judicial authorities need to instigate official actions against hate crimes and speech without needing an official complaint to be filed. This is not just a vital need for Protestant Christians, but for any disadvantaged group.
- There is a need for more action to be taken by journalistic bodies and other civil society organizations to raise awareness among members of the local media (journalists, columnists) of the problem of hate speech and to require formal education to create a sensitivity towards this issue.
- Education to raise awareness of hate speech should be given to social media companies' Turkey offices or Turkish sections, especially to personnel in oversight. In addition, complaints need to be more carefully audited, the accounts sharing hate speech should be shut down and mechanisms should be created that will prevent these same people from opening a new account to continue even more hate speech.
- The policy applied to foreign members of the Protestant community which suddenly prohibits their entry to the country in a shocking manner must be repealed. This situation must come to an end. These people have not been charged with any crime and are suffering purely because of their religious faith. People who are deemed inappropriate to remain in our country must be subject to objective, lawful and equitably applied policies.

Sincerely,  
**Protestant Church Association**

