

# Annual report

## Stefanus Alliance

# 2023-2024

Disillusioned with the misuse of power in the guise of religion, some reject all forms of faith. Others turn to Christianity. Our partners engage with these people. Some make the decision to be baptized.





# Faith and freedom of religion

Increasingly Stefanus Alliance promotes the stories of women who have suffered persecution.

Visits with the partners at Stefanus Alliance make unforgettable impressions. A young woman somewhere in Central Asia recounted the story of her and her husband fleeing in order to avoid being stoned to death. Their house was destroyed just moments after they fled. During a meal the woman cited John 15,20 and said “I understood that what Jesus said is happening to me; if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

The young woman told her story in a trauma-healing community of christian women. They meet secretly to be strengthened by the fellowship and receive help battling trauma.

## Women's stories untold

Stefanus Alliance have seen many reasons to support the fellowships of christian women and increasingly tell their stories of discrimination and persecution. We need to shed light on these women and their stories.



**Stefanus Alliance boldly combines support for Christian mission with advocacy for religious freedom for all.**

The majority of churchgoers around the world are women. They are invaluable as proactive drivers in the church mission. They often contribute more than men in activities like diaconal work, evangelizing, education and faith based training for the next generation.

If women are restricted from actively getting involved, or if they disappear from church due to persecution, that could be devastating for the survival of the church.

In Iran, a clear majority of the house churches that are being persecuted by the Ayatollahs are led by

women. In Central-Asia the pastor's wife might need to take the responsibility, not only for the family, but for the whole church, if her husband is arrested. Empowering women, in highly demanding yet underappreciated roles is crucial for the survival of both families and congregations.

## Targeting Women

Women are suffering persecution differently than men. To take it to an extreme: Men are thrown in jail and become “heroes” while women are persecuted out of sight and are subject to sexual assaults and shame. We know women are the most vulnerable when the government, or terrorists, attack religious minorities. They know that by targeting women they can undermine the very foundations of entire societies.

This is why Stefanus Alliance has put a spotlight on women's freedom of religion as a matter of principle. Women in several religions are victims of violations. Both religious leaders and equality activists have long argued that freedom of religion and equality of genders are at odds with each other. However, our experience from many countries through five years of systematic work is that these rights can, in fact, strengthen each other.

Stefanus Alliance boldly combines support for Christian mission with advocacy for religious freedom for all. Women's stories and challenges demonstrate with clarity the profound significance of this mission.

## Hope For The Future

Unfortunately, the situation for religious freedom and religious minorities is getting worse in large and powerful countries. But there are, as Leonard Cohen said, cracks where the light gets in. This annual report provides a selection of stories from the work that we and Stefanus Alliance's partners have done in the past year. The stories give us new momentum and belief in the future, despite strong counterforces.

Oslo, June 2024



Anne Mari  
Schiager Topland  
CHAIRMAN OF THE  
BOARD



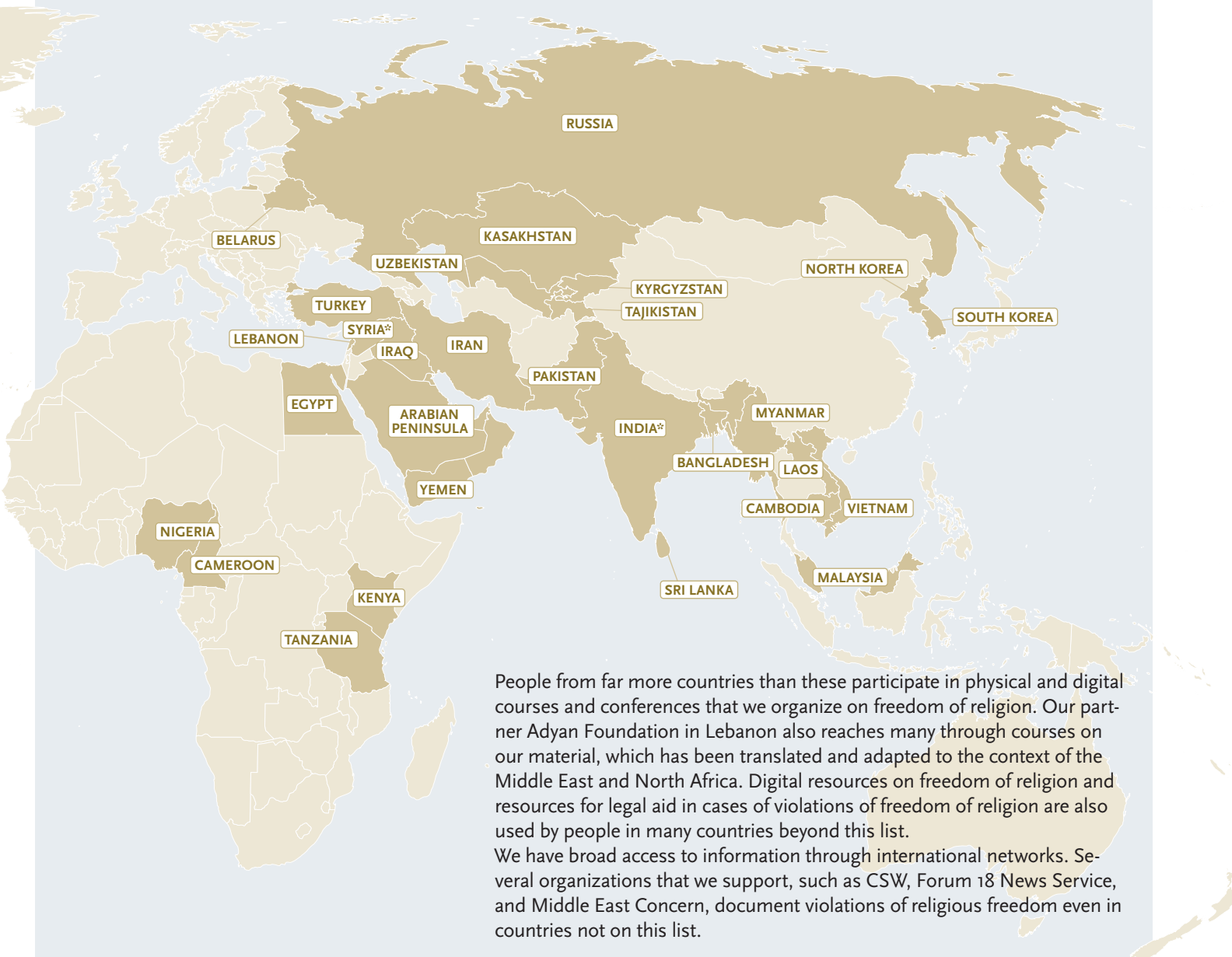
Ed Brown  
SECRETARY-GENERAL



# Where we work

In these countries/regions, Stefanus Alliance supports work done by our partners.

(Countries with an asterisk: Specific projects completed at the end of 2023.)



## Important statistics

Donations  
in Total:  
**33,9**  
millions NOK

Subscribers  
to Stefanus  
Magazine:  
**16 400**

Followers on  
Facebook:  
**8 900**

Followers on  
Instagram:  
**1 120**

Advocacy  
Campaign  
Partners:  
**4680**

Prayer  
Partners:  
**1410**

Committed  
Donors  
**3150**



*An Iranian convert is baptized by Pastor "Ron" and an assistant somewhere in Turkey.*

# A NEW MOVEMENT OF FAITH

- A new movement is underway in the Middle East. Many people are encountering Jesus in miraculous ways, says the head of a theological center supported by Stefanus Alliance.

Mehrdad Fatehi is the leader of the Pars Theological Centre. Every year, the center provides theological education and leadership training to hundreds of Iranian Christians, both in and outside Iran. Several students come from Afghanistan and Turkey.

In Iran, many are disillusioned with a regime that wages war through militias in neighboring countries, oppresses its own people, and destroys the country's economy.

- A great many people feel overwhelming adversity. Economically, spiritually, and psychologically, the nation faces formidable obstacles; it resembles a wasteland. But amidst the shadows, we see a new movement orchestrated by God's Spirit in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries. Our task is to nurture the flame of faith, says Fatehi.

## Faith in Afghanistan

Pastor Ron's colleague, who fled Iran after his church was shut down by the regime, elaborates:

- In Iran, we have seen phenomenal growth in the number of Muslims finding Christ for a long time. Now, something similar is happening in countries like Afghanistan, Turkey, and Iraq as well. Our contacts in Afghanistan report that some have come to faith even after the Taliban seized power in August 2021.

For security reasons, we are not using Pastor Ron's real name.

” Our contacts in Afghanistan report that some have come to faith even after the Taliban seized power

*Pastor Ron, Pars Theological Centre*



Ethnicity and language transcend national borders. Farsi, which is the national language of Iran, is spoken in both Afghanistan (Dari) and Tajikistan (Tajik), Iran's northern neighbor. Pars currently has 12 Afghan students in its digital education program. One of them is hiding from the Taliban.

An Afghan student who took the exam last fall took the initiative for Pars to hold seminars for members of underground churches inside Afghanistan. Pars underlines that this has had a direct impact on the spread of the gospel.

A good number of Christians fled Afghanistan when the Taliban came to power. Yet the faith is not dead.

### Trauma in Afghanistan

Pastor Ron is open about the significant mental-health challenges faced by both Afghan and Iranian Christians. In the fall of 2023, he taught a course on trauma and trauma management to two networks of Afghan Christian leaders who had fled Afghanistan, most of them before and some of them after the Taliban takeover.

- It is very important for them to process trauma, Pastor Ron says. At one of the gatherings, he met Afghan Christian women who had experienced domestic violence.

Ron tells us many of the men had trauma from war, and most of them had experienced fathers, brothers, or close friends being killed or injured in the civil war. Some of them had trauma from persecution.



Worship during a Pars-Conference in 2023 Photo: Pars Theological Centre

### Pars in 2023

- 504 undergraduate students in theology and leadership
- 238 participants at 13 conferences (2 of them were digital participants)
- 284 students in mentorship programmes
- 618 hours of video-education
- 1690 hours of counseling

## WOMEN SEEK HELP

Pastor Ron says that throughout 2023, the Pars Theological Centre provided 1,690 hours of counseling. Nearly two-thirds of the clients were women. A clear majority of Iranian house churches are led by women. Counseling is provided through online channels or by phone.

He is part of a team that runs Pars' counseling service for Iranian Christians in Iran, Turkey, and the rest of the diaspora.

The clients who reach out struggle with anxiety, internal conflicts within communities and families, stress and pressure in pastoral and leadership roles, marital problems, feelings of abandonment, and parenting issues.

-A significant number of young people are struggling with severe depression, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, physical and emotional abuse. We are noticing a growing sense of hopelessness among our clients. Some are victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Our counselors have been actively helping clients face and manage these complex challenges, says Pastor Ron.

## Several Christians Arrested

In 2023, 166 Christians were arrested in Iran. Over 100 were arrested in waves throughout the three summer months and there was a new wave around Christmas. Most are released after brutal interrogations in custody. Most do not want their cases made public, because of potential consequences. As a result, more and more victims of persecution are becoming "faceless victims."

Source: Annual Report, «Faceless victims» by Article18, Middle East Concern and CSW (who are partners of Stefanus Alliance) and Open Doors International.

Scan the QR-code to read the full report.







*The convert Yousef finds strength in prayer and the Word of God. Photo: Johannes Morken*

# Power in The Name of Jesus

Prayer in Jesus' name was what helped Yousef overcome his addiction.

Stefanus Alliance meets Yousef in Kuwait. He is sitting in Pastor Issam's office. This was where he received help. Pastor Issam is part of a network that Stefanus Alliance supports. The network follows up on people from a Muslim background who have come to faith in Jesus. For security reasons, we do not use real names.

Yousef had a safe and good job. After his mother died, he stayed with his father. They had a close relationship. But then Yousef got involved in drugs.

– I was the worst one in the group, Yousef says.

## **Lost his job**

He skipped work so often that he was fired. The landlord sent the police after Yousef to collect unpaid rent. Yousef ended up in jail, but he couldn't bring himself to

” I have experienced  
God to be real.

*Yousef, convert in Kuwait*

tell his father what was going on, so he didn't ask for money to make amends either.

In his desperation, Yousef sought help from a sheik who prayed for him. However, neither he nor Muslim healers were able to help Yousef.

A friend of Yousef got informed that he was in jail. She had a Christian pastor pray for Yousef. After that, Yousef agreed to meet with Pastor Issam, thinking he had nothing to lose, and he discovered that prayer in Jesus' name worked. He broke free from his addiction and miraculously got his old job back. His employer wanted to give him another chance.

Yousef was disciplined by Pastor Issam and then baptized. Now he is actively involved in a digital Bible ministry.

### **Room of Prayer**

His wife, whom he met at a church over four years ago, also has a Muslim background. They have created a prayer room in their home. They have a little daughter who is around one year old.

- We are worried about her future in a Muslim society, says Yousef.

According to their ID cards, they are all Muslims, and there is nothing they can do about it. Yousef and his wife had to get married legally as Muslims. In the church, they later received a blessing or a "spiritual wedding".

- Every day we take our daughter to the prayer room. She joins us in church. We place her in God's hands, Yousef explains.

His father warmly welcomed him home when he came back from jail. But he does not share Yousef's new faith.

- My father thinks it's best for our daughter and for all of us that I return to Islam, but I reply that the Quran and Islam could not help me, and that I found help in the Bible and prayer in Jesus' name. For a while, my father thought my faith was a short-lived fad that would pass over, Yousef says, adding, - But I have experienced that God is real. That's why I'm not going back.

# Leaving Islamic Extremism

For 20 years, Pastor Amir has been responsible for coordinating the follow-up of people from a Muslim background who seek contact with Christians.

Many Christian TV channels target the Arab world and this has led to increasing numbers of conversations with Muslims about faith in Christ. Many Muslims are also, after IS, tired of Islamic extremism and violence in the name of religion.

### **Isolated**

Pastor Amir's missionary work is supported by Stefanus Alliance. In the Arabian Peninsula, it is extremely difficult to be a Christian convert with a Muslim background. The social pressure is strong in a culture where religion, family, identity, and faith are closely intertwined. If you convert, you risk losing everything.

- Christian converts with a Muslim background in the Arabian Peninsula are unable to meet openly in most places. They cannot share their faith with their families, at least not with the entire family, says Amir, whom we meet in Dubai. For safety reasons, we are not using his real name. He follows-up more than 20 converts in Saudi Arabia.

### **Fellowship**

Together with Amir, Stefanus Alliance organizes conferences for Christians with a Muslim background from the Arabian Peninsula. They get to meet others with the same faith: They get fellowship, teaching, conversations, and prayer.

A conference was organized in August 2023 and one in February 2024. The conferences are held in countries outside the region.

” Christian converts with a Muslim  
background (...) are unable to  
meet openly in most places.

*Pastor Amir*





# Rescued from North Korea



In 2023, 149 North Korean refugees crossed the border into China, made their way through China and on through Southeast Asian countries before they reached safety in South Korea.

Helping Hands Korea (HHK) was behind the rescue operations. 49 of these refugees were rescued with financial support from Stefanus Alliance - four more than in 2022.

In three operations in March and April 2024, 54 more were rescued to safety, several of them with support from Stefanus Alliance.

## Protected by a chinese church

Two of these 54 people sent their distress calls early in 2024 from a secret hideout in northeastern China. A teenage girl and her widowed grandmother needed help. They had fled North Korea six years ago. At that time, their family was broken up. The girl, called Jeng-won, lost her father to cancer and her mother abandoned her. Her grandmother brought her with her and fled to China.

For 18 months, Her grandmother managed to support them doing unregistered work in a Chinese factory that produced ready-made meals. But when the pandemic hit, the factory was shut down almost overnight. Without visas and Chinese ID papers, they could not get a vaccine or a vaccination certificate.

During the pandemic, they were protected and cared for by a Chinese church. However, after the church was persecuted by the authorities, they had to leave. They didn't know where to go. That is when the distress call was sent to HHK and they were rescued.

## Churches are closing

China's intensified surveillance, with a vast network of AI-powered cameras and facial recognition, makes North Korean defectors feel increasingly unsafe.

It is also becoming more difficult for churches in China to protect refugees. The registered Three-Self Church in China is being forced to install surveillance cameras. Leaders of unregistered churches are increasingly being brought to trial and their churches are closed.

- The growing surveillance and restrictions are severely impacting our work to evacuate North Korean refugees. Chinese churches play a crucial role in





A grandmother with the grandchild is grateful for the rescue operation. Photo: Helping Hands Korea

providing safe havens for refugees who have escaped from North Korea. However, in 2023, several Korean-Chinese churches sheltering refugees were forced to close, says Peters.

#### Increased efforts during the pandemic

Peters has no precise statistics. However, Helping Hands Korea (HHK) is estimated to have helped between 2,500 and 3,000 people since starting in 1996. When the pandemic hit, others had to close escape routes due to Chinese control and restrictions. Even more distress calls reached Peters and Helping Hands Korea.

By the end of April 2024, 753 North Korean refugees have been rescued since the beginning of 2020.

Helping Hands Korea coordinates operations from Seoul, South Korea. They always look for the most vulnerable: women with children. Some elderly people and people with disabilities also receive help.

- We give the Lord the glory for being able to help so many, says Peters.

” We give the Lord the glory for being able to help so many.

Tim A. Peters

## ‘Prophetic call against injustice’



Mike Gabriel.  
Photo: Birgitte Moe Olsen

Since 2009, there have been 1,000 documented cases of discrimination, threats, and violence against Christians in Sri Lanka. Pastors are often targeted.

Sri Lanka's National Christian Evangelical Alliance (NCEASL), which documents abuses, is a partner of the Stefanus Alliance. Often, it is representatives of the state apparatus who are behind the abuses.

NCEASL has also begun to document abuses against Muslims and Hindus.

A pro-Buddhist policy in a predominantly Buddhist country affects all religious minorities.

#### Extremist pressure

In the aftermath of the civil war (which lasted until 2009) between the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups, religious identity has become more prominent.

Christians face extremist pressure from three sides:

- In the Tamil-dominated areas in the northeast, Hindu nationalists and Buddhist extremists share a common enemy in Christians. They oppose evangelization, fearing that their "own" people will convert. Hindu nationalist groups have branches in India.
- The Easter bombing in 2019 – which killed 269 people – was the result of Muslim extremism. Five years later, NCEASL is still assisting victims who lost their sight, legs,

and arms and are struggling to earn an income.

- Buddhist monks spread extremist views – without state intervention. Between November 2021 and October 2022, NCEASL documented 21 cases where monks were responsible for attacks on Christians.

As extremism rises, so does misogyny.

#### Against Injustice

Authorities are demanding mandatory registration of all places of worship. Small congregations that meet in homes are particularly vulnerable.

- During the civil war, the church stood up against injustice and abuse and helped civilians. The church must remain faithful to its prophetic calling. We must not be afraid to hold those in power accountable, even though this is difficult for us as a minority, says Mike Gabriel of NCEASL.

” We must not be afraid to hold those in power accountable.

Mike Gab



Human Friends Organization (HFO) quickly deployed to Jaranwala to assess the needs of the victims of extremist violence. Photo: Sobia Batoo, HFO



# New life after disaster



The Salvation Army Church in Jaranwala in its rebuilt state. Photo: Human Friends Organization

Disaster struck Christian neighborhoods in Jaranwala near Faisalabad in August 2023: A mob burned and destroyed churches and homes after accusing two Christian brothers, without evidence, of desecrating a copy of the Quran.

Stefanus Alliance provided approximately \$15,000 USD to HFO so that they could provide aid to families who had lost everything they owned. They received rice, household items, and simple furniture to help them get by.

## Rebuilt

The government of Punjab province allocated 2 million rupees (\$6-7000 USD) to 90 families whose homes had been destroyed. All have now been rebuilt.

Nearly all of the 25 destroyed churches have now been restored with funds from the authorities. HFO has built three churches in another area of the same district.





Dozens of people were arrested after the mob's rampage - they were identified by videos and facial recognition. However, church leaders have been pressured to withdraw their complaint against the perpetrators.

According to HFO, local and Punjab authorities have worked to prevent new attacks. The Punjab government has included church leaders in the district's peace and interfaith committees - in order to listen to the concerns of Christians.

### Inclusion

HFO visited Jaranwala during Ramadan in March and organized an Iftar in the streets. Iftar is the evening meal that breaks the fast. Christians and Muslims, both of whom were fasting, were able to learn about inclusion and solidarity.

Together with the Department of Human Rights and Minorities in Punjab, among others, HFO held an event in Jaranwala on UN Human Rights Day on December 10th, in solidarity with the victims in Jaranwala. Muslims participated. HFO held an event for Christians in Jaranwala at Christmas.

- Christians in Pakistan feel weak and scared. Building a new society where Christians are safe is becoming important and difficult, says Sobia Batool of HFO.

### Political Advocacy

HFO, along with others, engages in political advocacy to protect underage girls from abduction, forced conversion, and forced marriage. Hundreds of Christian and Hindu girls are subjected to this every year.

Throughout 2023, which was marked by political chaos, HFO conducted advocacy meetings with parliamentarians. Fortunately, 90 percent of them were re-elected in the 2024 elections.

HFO presented demands on behalf of minorities to all major parties before their party programs were adopted. HFO demanded the inclusion of minorities in political processes, quotas for education and employment, the inclusion of minorities in education curricula, and practical policies to stop forced conversion and forced marriage.

” Building a new society where Christians are safe is becoming important and difficult.

*Sobia Batool i HFO*

# Escaping Death Sentence

Eight people in Pakistan who faced the death penalty or were already sentenced to death have been acquitted in the past six years through the efforts of Human Friends Organization (HFO), a partner of the Stefanus Alliance.

The Christian woman Asia Bibi was the first acquitted. She was arrested in 2009, sentenced to death in 2010, and finally acquitted by the country's Supreme Court in 2019. She left the country the same year.

The most recent case so far is Nauman Masih. He was acquitted in February 2024 of one of two blasphemy charges. Masih was sentenced to death on May 30th, 2023. HFO then secured a lawyer to appeal the case. Masih is awaiting a decision in the second case.

” HFO hired a lawyer who took the case that others did not dare take.

### Acquitted

In January 2023, Asif Idrees was acquitted. He had been confined – in prison or a mental hospital – since January 2012. Idrees belongs to the Ahmadiyya community. He was accused of blasphemy under a section that carries the death penalty.

The case was particularly sensitive as it is forbidden for members of the Ahmadiyya community to call themselves Muslims. HFO hired a lawyer who took the case that others did not dare take. He was acquitted because his mental health meant that he could not be found guilty.

### Destroying Lives

No one has been executed after being sentenced to death. Appeals often succeed in a higher court. However, this only happens after many years in a cell waiting for the appeal to be processed, and by then, the lives of an entire family can be ruined. After an acquittal, they often have to live at a secret address, as extremists have taken the death penalty into their own hands on several occasions.

HFO is engaged in advocacy work to end the abuse of the blasphemy law: To a large extent, people who want to have someone locked up can spread false accusations of blasphemy, without the slightest risk of being punished.



# Youth are being baptized

” More people come to our church, especially youth. They are looking for something new.

*Pastor Ramazan Arkan*



*New believers are baptized in one of two baptism ceremonies in 2023. Photo: Antalya Evangelical Church*





The Antalya Church has baptized 33 new members so far this year and last year. More are expected in the fall.

The Antalya Evangelical Church, which is supported by Stefanus Alliance, is seeing a growing number of people who no longer want to call themselves Muslims.

- Turkey has enormous economic problems. The government would like to be a conservative Islamic example, but then corruption is revealed. People are becoming disillusioned. They no longer want to be identified with Islam because they suffer under people who call themselves Muslims. Many stop believing, they become agnostics. More people come to our church, especially youth. They are looking for something new. Some of them accept the Christian faith, says head pastor Ramazan Arkan.

#### **Sowing seeds**

In June of this year, ten of these were baptized after completing the first part of their training. Last year, 23 were baptized. The church also has an alpha marriage course with 17 couples attending.

At Christmas, the church in Antalya held two large concerts in public venues in the city and several smaller outreach events. 1,000 people had an encounter with the gospel. On Easter days this year, the church reached out to around 550 with their choir and Easter play. People were invited on the street and on social media.

- We are glad to see how the Lord is using the seeds that were sown, says Ramazan Arkan.

#### **Denied entry**

The entire Protestant community in Turkey is severely affected by the Erdogan regime's expulsion or exclusion of foreign workers who have served in churches for years: They are not getting their visas renewed or are being denied entry after trips abroad.

In total, at least 230 people have been affected by this after 20 new ones were affected in the first quarter of 2024. Antalya Evangelical Church has lost a total of five employees. Four of these are married with children. Families are also affected by Erdogan's closed door.

One of the five had a key role in the third congregation that the Antalya church opened last year. The exclusion created major problems for this new meeting place. The Antalya church is training five young people who can gradually take on more leadership responsibility.

- The policy of expelling foreign employees, refusing to renew visas or refusing entry is extensive and unfortunately continues, sighs Ramazan.

#### **Building a Church in the Earthquake-Stricken Land**

The church in Antalya played a significant role in relief efforts following the devastating earthquakes in southeastern Turkey, near the Syrian border, in February 2023. The First Hope Association, also supported by Stefanus Alliance, joined in these efforts.

In nine out of eleven affected cities, 10-20% of the urban areas were destroyed. These cities are largely handling the situation themselves. However, the situation was far worse in Adiyaman and Hatay. Hatay is the site of the biblical city of Antioch. In Adiyaman, 60% of the city was destroyed, while in Hatay, the destruction reached 80%. People there still lack basic necessities, and vast amounts of collapsed concrete need to be removed. Many have lost their jobs.

The church in Antalya has two teams distributing food. More people from Antalya are planning to travel there to assist.

Adiyaman is a predominantly Kurdish and religiously conservative city. The church has previously faced significant challenges in establishing a presence there. However, doors opened for them after the earthquake.

- The strong church-based relief efforts have made Christians more accepted, says Ramazan.

Together with two Protestant churches located much closer - in Mardin and Diyarbakir - the Antalya church is helping to build a church in the city. The church is expected to be completed by the end of the year. The building will initially be used as a center for assistance to earthquake victims.



**New believers are baptized in one of two baptism ceremonies in 2023.**

*Photo: Antalya Evangelical Church*



# 500 Bibles distributed

A network that has long preached the christian faith to Muslims has now also reached Hindus.

Russia's war in Ukraine has led to skyrocketing global commodity prices. Life for the poor in Bangladesh has become far worse than it was during the pandemic years.

A partner of the Stefanus Alliance reports that Christians are also suffering from growing intolerance and Islamic extremism. Mehedi, which is not his real name, leads a movement of several thousand Jesus-believing Muslims. They believe in the gospel and Christian doctrines, but they have chosen to retain their cultural identity as Muslims. Some continue going to the mosque so as not to be on the outside the local community. They refer to God as Allah and Jesus as Isa Masih.

- Despite the difficulties, Allah has given us the opportunity to worship Him, proclaim His word and serve His children, Mehedi





writes. In 2023, our partner provided food aid to nearly 500 families who would not have been able to cope. 200 families who could barely afford schooling for their children could afford their education.

### Reaching Hindu Communities

Our partner organization initially focused on reaching out to Muslims. However, in 2021, they were introduced to some Hindu leaders and hired an evangelist to engage with them. In 2022, 20 of them accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. In April 2023, they and five more were baptized.

As Mehedi reports, "They are now recognized as Christians within the community, no longer as Hindus. Every Sunday, they gather for worship services." He further mentions their request for a dedicated prayer house to be constructed for their congregation.

Last year, our partner distributed 500 Bibles to 500 families. In only one instance did an issue arise. An evangelist had baptized a family where none of them had any formal education except for a girl in the ninth grade. She expressed her desire for a Bible.

When the imam visited their home, he discovered the Bible and pressured the family to reveal who had provided it. Ultimately, they were compelled to disclose the evangelist's name. The imam threatened the evangelist, warning him that if he ever returned, he would not leave alive. The imam then forcefully took the Bible from them.

### The Attack

Last summer, another evangelist was preaching in a village a few kilometers from his home. He was attacked and beaten up by a group of extremists. They threatened to kill him and burn down his house.

- By Allah's grace, the man was saved from the extremists' violence by some people from the village. The mullahs and local leaders excommunicated the evangelist's family and forbade all contact with them. The evangelist's father is a day laborer. Those who give him work or sell food to the family would be expelled from the village. This has exposed the whole family to mental and economic stress.

The evangelist is now living with a friend because it is too dangerous to be home.

- Pray for this family and all of our work, urges Mehedi.

” In 2023, our partner provided food aid to nearly 500 families who would not have been able to cope.

## Bringing Solace to Victims of Violence

Pastor Steve's church community in Vietnam experienced a remarkable growth of 133 new congregations from 2022 to 2023. The community had 1283 congregations at the end of last year, with 177 new ones joining, while 44 existing congregations were closed or disbanded.

- When people come to faith, they experience a much better life. They stop drinking, smoking, and gambling, Pastor Steve excitedly wrote in a report. He expressed his belief that God is opening doors, step by step.

### Uprising

Many congregations are located in the mountainous regions of northern Vietnam. Others are situated in the central highlands of this elongated country. Last summer, there was a new wave of violent unrest in this region. The background for the violence is that local authorities have taken land away from people.

Some people were killed. Hundreds were arrested. Pastor Steve is clear that no one from his denomination was behind the violence. However, ten of his pastors were arrested but have now been released. Church members were also arrested and six churches were closed.

” Pastor Steve personally traveled into the area five times to calm the tensions.

### Encouraged

Pastor Steve personally traveled into the area five times to calm the tensions. Many were surprised to see him come. Pastor Steve showed up at three different churches to encourage and comfort the believers who had not been able to gather for a month.

Pastor Steve was initially warned by a local policeman not to travel, but then he was granted permission by the police at the regional level. When he arrived, Pastor Steve was interrogated by the local police for three hours. He signed the interrogation document but added that he rejects all charges and disagrees with the police's version. Several churches are still closed.

- Pray for those affected by the violence and those who have had their churches closed, says Pastor Steve.



Women who are working for everyone's right to freedom of religion, here at a gathering in Nairobi, Kenya. Photo: Anne Marken Gihlemoen

# Building Trust

For the first time, orphaned Christian children in a war-torn state in Nigeria dared to shake Muslim children's hands.

This happened at an orphanage in Southern Kaduna. A team from the organization PROCMURA, a partner of Stefanus Alliance, was visiting. The team is trained to teach about freedom of religion.

## Lost Their Parents due to Violence

Most of the children in the orphanage lost their parents due to an increasingly violent conflict over grazing and farmland in this Nigerian state.

The conflict is raging between the Fulani herders, who are predominantly Muslim, and the farmers, who are mainly Christian. The Fulani come from Northern Kaduna, while the Christian farmers live in the south. A violent militia from the Fulani people is behind many killings and much destruction. A long series of deadly attacks has plagued Kaduna like a nightmare.

The conflict also has a significant religious dimension. Muslims are the majority, Christians are the minority. In the orphanage, on the other hand, most of the orphans come from Christian homes, with a minority from Muslim homes. Both staff and children were delighted that the visiting team who brought food to them included both Christians and Muslims.

- The stories from the visit are heartwarming, says PROCMURA, adding:

- The perception that all Muslims are out to kill Christians disappeared. Even the children could see that Muslims care about them too. For the first time, Christian children voluntarily held Muslim children's hands and danced.

PROCMURA believes that the seeds of religious tolerance sown during the visit will find fertile ground among the children and in the community.

## Significant Challenges

Those who visit the orphanage are trained to teach religious freedom using resources from Stefanus





” The perception that all Muslims are out to kill Christians disappeared.

Alliance and the Nordic ecumenical network NORFORB.

ROCMURA reports on a number of challenges in several countries:

- Extremists deprive people of their religious freedom - some lose their lives because of their faith.
- Governments impose far too strict restrictions on religious freedom.
- There are many examples of Christians restricting other Christians from other churches from exercising their religious freedom. Similarly, between Muslims with different Muslim backgrounds.
- Women who marry men from another religion may face opposition from their families. They are often forced to convert.

PROCMURA meets people who fear that teaching about religious freedom has a hidden agenda for LGBT rights. Traditionalists also resist - they fear that work for religious freedom will cause women to lose respect for their men.

Such challenges are very sensitive in the local context and must be met wisely. It is important to teach about religious freedom as a right for all and to strengthen the work for peaceful coexistence between people of different faiths and backgrounds.

#### PROCMURA

- Christian organization established in 1959.
- Headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya.
- Works to foster positive relationships between Christians and Muslims, considering this an important part of its Christian mission.
- Has projects in approximately 20 African countries.
- Stefanus Alliance supports PROCMURA's work in Kenya, Tanzania, Cameroon, and Nigeria.

## ‘A Privilege’



The children in Cairo's 'garbage city' are living examples that the Stefanus Children's Centers make a difference. Photo: Reidulf Stige

"At Anafora, we were impressed by a fantastic new church and a rehabilitation clinic. At the Anastasia Education Center, 25 young Copts received diplomas for completing their courses. We witnessed 17-18-year-old Copts learning English while gaining confidence and hope for the future.

Many young leaders at Anafora are women. They never thought they could achieve anything. Now they shine and pass on what they have received themselves.

At Stefanus Children's Center in one of Cairo's 'garbage cities,' we were welcomed with songs sung by children. Matthew (5) recited Matthew chapter 5 for us by memory. In another room, children drew and colored the Bible text before discussing its meaning.

A fifth of approximately 1,500 employees attended one of Stefanus Children's Center's 105 kindergartens as children themselves. Now, they are good role models who meet the children with constant encouragement. The dedication and commitment of the leaders of thousands of children makes us humble and grateful.

Having the opportunity to see and support these unique projects is a privilege."

*Reidulf Stige, Grimstad, who participated in a group trip to Egypt*



*Pastor Keshab Acharya sentenced to one year in prison in nepal.  
Photo: Private*

## Advocacy for the Persecuted

Fully prepared advocacy letters are distributed to our Advocacy Campaign Partners 8-10 times a year. The letters are mostly sent to the nearest embassy of the respective country. We have approximately 4,500 Advocacy Campaign Partners. In addition, there are approximately 80 "Faith Activists," an Advocacy Campaign program for young people.

### Some advocacy issues in 2023-2024:

- India: Violence and persecution are increasing
- Algeria: Pastor sentenced to two years in prison
- Nepal: Pastor Keshab Acharya sentenced to one year in prison
- China: Refugees forcibly returned to North Korea
- Vietnam: Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton denied medical care

In many cases, our advocacy efforts have not yet yielded reported results. Pastor Nguyen Trong Ton in Vietnam remains in prison. Pastor Keshab Acharya in Nepal has not started his sentence as of April 15th. The situation in Nepal is deteriorating. In Nicaragua, where we have advocated for Catholic leaders, Bishop Alvarez and several priests have been deported. However, in 2023, we have received news of the following releases:

- Nguyen Bac Truyen (Vietnam) was released after serving half of his 11-year sentence.
- Yousuf Nadarkhani (Iran) was released in February.
- In China, the Christian Uyghur pastor, Alim, was released in March 2023, according to China Aid.

## Torchlight Processions for the Excluded

In 2023, torchlight processions were held in 22 cities and towns in collaboration with Open Doors. The motto was to support those who are excluded for their faith: kidnapped, arrested, imprisoned, sentenced to death, forced to convert, forced into marriage, raped, bullied, beaten up, deprived of their jobs, denied education, excluded from the curriculum, labeled as traitors, thrown out of their homes, displaced, had their places of worship closed, subjected to raids in their homes.



*The torchlight procession in Oslo ended at Eidsvolls plass in front of the Norwegian Parliament. Photo: Johannes Morken*

## UN Visit to Oslo

On August 22, 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, Naila Ghanea, visited Oslo to participate in the commemoration of the UN Day for Victims of Religiously Motivated Violence. The event was organized by Stefanus Alliance, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, and the Council for Cooperation on Religion and life beliefs.



*The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, Naila Ghanea, visited Oslo in august 2023. Photo: Johannes Morken*



## Visibility

A crucial role for Stefanusalliansen is to serve as a public voice for people who are persecuted for their faith.

In 2023, Stefanusalliansen signed over 80 articles and op-eds in Norwegian media outlets such as Vårt Land, Aftenposten, Klassekampen, Dagen, Stavanger Aftenblad, Fædrelandsvennen, Dagsavisen, Panorama Nyheter, Minerva, and more.

Employees are interviewed and increasingly, Stefanus Alliance is present on Christian radio and TV channels with short messages, interviews, and devotions. Occasionally, Stefanus Alliance is also featured on NRK, the main television channel of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation.

So far in 2024, Stefanus Alliance has signed approximately 35 op-eds.

Many events, including torchlight processions and concert series, are covered by local media.

In 2023 and 2024, we continued to shed light on the alarming situation for Christians and Muslims in India through media campaigns and political initiatives. We have published a series of op-eds questioning Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide due to the lack of visible Norwegian criticism of the increased violence against minorities in India.

Following the violent attack on Christian neighborhoods in Jaranwala, Pakistan in August 2023, stemming from an unfounded blasphemy accusation, we received significant media coverage, including in Aftenposten and NRK. We also had the opportunity to write about the burning of churches in several countries and the impact this has on us.

We have closely followed the story of the Russian Orthodox priest Viktor Ioann Burdin, who was convicted of blasphemy against the church and banned from practicing his profession. This exemplifies how critics of the war are punished by both secular and religious authorities.

On March 8th, in both 2023 and 2024, we highlighted the situation of women in the global church.



Article in Aftenposten about Pakistan, blasphemy, and violence. Facsimile, August 24th, 2023



Op-ed on the Disturbing Developments in India. Facsimile, 2.4.2024



Op-ed in Klassekampen about Christian flight from the Middle East. Facsimile, December 23, 2023

## Global Stages



Ed Brown (back row) attended the meeting of the International Religious Freedom Alliance (IRFBA) in Geneva in March 2024. Photo: IRFBA

In April 2023, General Secretary Ed Brown was invited to speak at a conference in Lebanon. Stefanus Alliance's partner in Lebanon, the Adyan Foundation, hosted a network of diplomats from around 40 countries working for freedom of religion - the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA).

Adyan, a recognized stakeholder in Lebanon, had arranged meetings with Lebanon's prime minister, other key political leaders, and religious leaders. Stefanus Alliance is a member of IRFBA's expert committee. Stefanus Alliance also participated in IRFBA's annual ministerial conference in Prague, Czech Republic, in November. The theme was "Freedom of Religion in Authoritarian Regimes."

Birgitte Moe Olsen was part of a delegation for young freedom of religion activists and brought a group of young activists from Southeast Asia. Elisa Chavez was on a panel in a session on freedom of religion and women. Brown participated in several networking meetings.

Brown also taught parliamentarians from around the world at a conference in Nairobi, Kenya in the spring of 2023. The theme was education and freedom of religion.

Elisa Chavez participated in a panel at a conference in the Vatican in connection with International Women's Day on March 8th. The theme was women and freedom of religion.



Elisa Chavez at the conference in the Vatican. Photo: Caritas



*Christian women in the neighborhood of Johannabad in Lahore, Pakistan, during a church service. Photo: Christine Gripsgård Lunga*

# Changed mindset

Sobia Batool from Pakistan "had an eye-opener" when she participated in a seminar in Bali, Indonesia, in October last year, organized by Stefanus Alliance. The theme was freedom of religion and women's rights.

The seminar was one of four regional seminars organized by Stefanus Alliance in 2022 and 2023 on freedom of religion and gender equality.

- In Bali, I met a female imam from Indonesia and female activists from several countries. It changed my whole mindset. I have never seen how the fight for religious freedom can be helpful in the fight for women's rights. Nor have I previously seen how important it is to involve women in the work. I was strongly inspired to take this with me, Batool says.

A few weeks after returning home, she was central to the implementation of the first conference for women religious leaders in Pakistan.

Susan Cherian from the Schumacher Center in New Delhi, India, was also in Bali.

- We got to emphasize the importance of documenting and highlighting women's experiences in accessing freedom of religion and belief. Their experiences are underreported because the religious space is occupied by men. Freedom of religion and belief is also an individual's right to practice their religion or belief, it is not about the rights of religion in itself, says Cherian.

A recent report from the Evangelical Fellowship of India explains how Christian women are particularly vulnerable to violations of freedom of religion in an India increasingly marked by Hindu nationalism.

Susan Cherian explains how a more aggressive majority religion in India is forcing Muslims to physically withdraw into their own ghettos. This is particularly hard on Muslim women who, either on their own or under pressure, withdraw from society - from schools, universities or work.

## Fighting against abuse

Emmanuella Rita Atsen was supposed to attend the seminar in Cape Town but was unable to leave Nigeria due to visa problems.

- Nigeria is known for its religiosity, but also for many barbaric acts in the name of religion. Women in Nigeria also suffer from violations of freedom of religion. I want to learn in order to use my knowledge to effectively intervene and to teach others who can promote freedom of religion as a right for all, Emmanuella says



*In 2021, Stefanus Alliance published the educational booklet "Freedom of Religion and Belief. Women in Focus." In 2023, the booklet was published in Arabic. In 2024, it was published in French and Norwegian.*





Nigeria is known for its religiosity, but also for many barbaric acts in the name of religion.

*Emmanuella Rita Atsen*

on being asked why she would have liked to be at the seminar.

### Strengthening Each Other

A key starting point is that freedom of religion and belief and gender equality, can strengthen each other rather than work against each other. The challenges vary in different parts of the world.

- In South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, there is often a lack of legislation, and women are often discriminated against both on the basis of religious identity and gender.
- In other areas, there is legislation. However, there is a lack of will to enforce the laws. In the Caucasus, Central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, there is a culture of impunity and of women and religious minorities being discriminated against in the justice system. Legislation against domestic violence is often not enforced where women from religious and ethnic minorities are victims. Police officers, for example, do not want to "get involved".

- More knowledge and greater scope for theological reflection is needed so that women can understand their own religion.

### Four regional seminars

- Yerevan, Armenia: for the Caucasus and Central Asia.
- Beirut, Lebanon: for the Middle East and North Africa.
- Cape Town, South Africa: for southern Africa.
- Bali, Indonesia: for South and South-east Asia.
- A total of 120 participants from 43 countries.
- Participants from Christianity, Bahá'í, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Yazidi, African spirituality.

## Challenging times

In several of the countries where Stefanus Alliance has partners, the authorities are making it increasingly difficult for non-governmental organizations to receive financial support from abroad. Civil society is being strangled. The problem has grown throughout 2023.

## Strengthening Political Influence

In 2024, Stefanus Alliance established a new position called Advisor on Politics and Communication. Kristin Rudstaden is already fully engaged in the role. A key task in 2024-2025 will be to follow up on the various Norwegian political parties' work on their programs for the next parliamentary term. It will also be important to follow up on political initiatives and build alliances with other participants in the church, civil society, and politics.



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*Aiman Umarova from Kazakhstan receives the Stefanus Prize 2024. Photo: Johannes Morken*

## ‘We Are Unstoppable’

Aiman Umarova was deeply grateful when she was presented with the 2024 Stefanus Prize on May 13th by Norwegian Development Minister Anne Beathe Tvinneim, a member of the Stefanus Prize committee.

- I dedicate the Stefanus Prize to the past heroes who have paid the ultimate price for their fight, she said.

- And I dedicate the prize to the Kazakh people. The majority supports me. The Stefanus Prize creates hope. Together we are getting closer to justice and dignity. Together we are unstoppable, Umarova said.

In 2023, 195 people were arrested for their religious practice in Kazakhstan. - The country is at a historical turning point, the winner said.

The Stefanus Prize is worth 10,000 euros. The prize committee is chaired by Bishop Ingeborg Middtømme.



*Nguyen Bac Truyen, with his wife Bui Thi Kim Phuong, receives the award diploma from the secretary general Ed Brown. Photo: Stefanus Alliance*

## ‘The Stefanus Prize Saved Me’

The Vietnamese lawyer Nguyen Bac Truyen, who received the Stefanus Prize in 2020, was at that time imprisoned with an 11-year sentence. He was released in September 2023. He was presented with the prize diploma at a ceremony in Prague in November in connection with an international meeting on freedom of religion.

Both Truyen and his wife Bui Thi Kim Phuong, who were invited to Prague, expressed their great gratitude. While her husband was in prison, Phuong was under constant surveillance, harassment and social isolation. She was therefore unable to find work.

- I lived completely alone and was often afraid. I felt violated. Since I had no regular income, the 10,000 euro Stefanus Prize was my salvation. The prize has not only recognized Truyen's important work, but it has also given me practical help, Phuong says. har ikke bare anerkjent Truyens viktige arbeid, men den ga meg praktisk hjelp, sier Phuong.

www.stefanus-usa.org



together for the persecuted