



We are fighting for a different world than the one authoritarian rulers and brutal dictators envision.



# Annual Report

## Stefanus Alliance International

# 2024-2025

While kidnappings, brutal assaults and deadly terror rage across many African countries, Stefanus Alliance International's partners are working to ensure that Christians and Muslims can live together in peace.



# Hope in the Face of Authoritarian Power

What does faith mean when people are exposed to brutal power?

This Easter, the Board of Stefanus Alliance International visited partners in Seoul, South Korea, and met refugees who have been helped to escape the dictatorship in North Korea.

One day, we looked through binoculars into a North Korean village, where people had been placed as extras on farms to create the illusion of a functioning society. The following days, we had close conversations with women who shared heartbreaking and courageous stories from North Korea. They spoke of people who had been killed or imprisoned for life in labor camps. They spoke of fleeing to China, where many became victims of slavery and forced marriage. They spoke of the fear that their escape or their faith could bring negative consequences for family members.

## Faith brought strength

One woman told of the imprisonment and torture she suffered shortly after coming to faith. She described how small glimpses of others' testimonies gave her the strength to survive one day at a time.

One day, a narrow beam of light fell on markings scratched into the door of her cell by a former prisoner: "Do not despair! Pray! This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name (...)" She prayed—and with her newfound faith, she led others to do the same.

We are brothers and sisters in faith with vastly different life experiences. During a shared meal, we experienced unity through trust in God. "I would like to read my favorite psalm," one of the women said. She read these verses from Psalm 67, which is also my own favorite, as Chair of the Board:

*"May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face shine on us –  
so that your ways may be known on earth,  
your salvation among all nations.  
May the peoples praise you, God;  
may all the peoples praise you."*

## Meaningful

Encounters like these show just how deeply meaningful our work is. One of our partners helps individuals from North Korea find freedom. Another smuggles money

to secret Christians inside the country. A third has, through documenting the abuses of Kim Jong-un's dictatorship, helped bring about EU sanctions. Stefanus Alliance International works on several levels to share the Christian faith, assist individuals, and promote freedom of religion for all through political advocacy.

To anyone who might question why Stefanus Alliance supports mission work in places where people risk persecution for their faith, the answer can be found in the women who fled Kim's dictatorship in North Korea. They testify to the deep significance of Christian faith as a source of hope.

## Our efforts make a difference

This annual report offers many glimpses and stories from Stefanus Alliance International's partners, who together carry out a wide-ranging mission for Christian outreach and religious freedom for all.

In an increasingly polarized world, we see authoritarian forces on the rise. Several of our partners contribute to documenting this troubling development.

At the same time, we see that our efforts make a difference. Our calling is to bear witness to the hope found in Jesus Christ, to support the persecuted and discriminated, and to spread awareness of everyone's rights—regardless of belief. Together with many others, we are fighting for a different world than the one authoritarian rulers and brutal dictators like Kim Jong-un envision.

Oslo, June 2025



Anne Mari  
Schiager Topland  
CHAIR OF THE BOARD



Ed Brown  
GENERAL SECRETARY



# Where We Work

These are the countries and regions where Stefanus Alliance International supports the work of our partners:

\* Partner since 2025.

\*\* Completed by 2024.



People from many more countries than these also participate in physical and digital courses and conferences we organize on freedom of religion or belief. Our partner, the Adyan Foundation in Lebanon, also reaches many through courses using our materials translated and adapted to the context of the Middle East and North Africa. Digital resources on freedom of religion and legal aid for

violations of this right are also used by people in many countries beyond this list.

We also gain broad access to information through international networks. Several organizations we support—such as CSW, Forum 18 News Service and Middle East Concern—document violations of freedom of religion in countries not listed here.





*In May 2024, 73-year-old Christian Nazir Masih died after a brutal mob assault. He had been falsely accused of blasphemy. Human Friends Organization organized a demonstration.*

*Photo: HFO*

# More Acquittals

In 2024, Human Friends Organization (HFO) in Pakistan provided legal assistance in over 40 major cases involving people accused of blasphemy or subjected to forced conversion and mob violence.

Even as extremism gains ground, HFO's efforts led to freedom in several cases:

- Asif Idrees, a mentally ill Christian man, was imprisoned for blasphemy in 2012. He was not released until January 2024—thanks to the work of an HFO-affiliated lawyer. People with mental illness often do not receive a fair trial.
- Nauman Masih, a Christian man, was falsely accused of blasphemy in 2019. He was sentenced to death in May 2023. In February 2024, following intervention from an HFO lawyer, he was acquitted in one of the two cases against him. The fight continues.
- In May 2024, HFO succeeded, with the help of a lawyer, in securing the acquittal of Akbar Raam, a young Hindu who had been unjustly imprisoned for ten months on blasphemy charges.

## **Sentenced to Death for Blasphemy**

The struggle continues in many other cases. Twenty-five Christians remain imprisoned for blasphemy, several

under death sentences. One of them is father of four Asif Pervaiz, who has been in prison since October 2013 and sentenced to death since 2020. On April 10, 2025, Asif and his wife Maroline believed their appeal would finally be heard. But the Lahore High Court session ended before his case was addressed. HFO continues to support the family with legal aid and financial help to ensure their survival.

## **Kidnapped and Raped**

Nagina was only 12 years old when she was kidnapped by three Muslim men on her way to school last year and subjected to sexual violence. Despite a police operation, Nagina remained in captivity. HFO secured a lawyer who managed to free her and has since helped the family financially and relocated them to safety.

“Hundreds of Christian and Hindu girls are subjected every year to forced conversion and

” Extremism is getting worse. But the cases where we succeed show there is hope.

*Sajid Christopher, HFO*





*Joint Christian demonstration against violence in India, New Delhi, February 2023.*

*Photo: Evangelical Fellowship of India*



forced marriage. HFO works politically to put an end to these tragedies and provides assistance to individual families,” says HFO leader Sajid Christopher.

### **Fighting the Extremists**

Sajid Christopher admits that the situation in Pakistan is getting worse:

“Extremists are a minority, but they have the weapons and the money to threaten an entire society. Still, the cases where we succeed show there is hope. No one dares speak out against the blasphemy law anymore, for fear of their lives. But HFO is in dialogue with Muslim leaders who understand that Pakistan must end the abuse of this law—an abuse that puts innocent people behind bars for years.”

# A Cry for Help

The situation for Muslims and Christians in India grows worse year by year under Hindu nationalist rule.

Pastors are beaten, ostracized, and arrested. Christians in the world’s most populous country are crying out for help—to a world that seems to care only about geopolitics.

A total of 640 incidents of violence against Christians were documented in 2024, according to the annual report from the Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI).

Over 840 threats and violent incidents were reported via a 24-hour helpline. EFI’s small team managed to verify 640 of them in time—39 more than the year before.

### **Violence has multiplied**

Since 2014, when the Hindu nationalist Modi government came to power, the number of verified violent incidents has increased fivefold. With more capacity, it’s likely that all 840 reports could have been verified—which would point to a sixfold rise in attacks since 2014.

The real number of threats and attacks is probably much higher. Many people don’t dare to report incidents for fear of retaliation.

- 12 state-level anti-conversion laws were in 2024 “abused to arrest and harass over 110 clergy” who were falsely accused of illegal conversions without any evidence.
- There is a growing increase in hate speech and harassment.
- Christian Dalits (the caste-less) and indigenous groups are most often targeted by mobs demanding they either convert to Hinduism—or be driven out of their villages.



*Pars Theological Centre envisions transforming Iran by equipping leaders of the growing underground church. Illustration photo: Shutterstock*

# A Persecuted Church in Growth

Hundreds of leaders in a growing Iranian church receive training.

The story of the underground church in Iran is remarkable. Despite persecution from the Ayatollah regime that took power in 1979, people with a Muslim background are coming to faith in Christ. Studies suggest that there are several hundred thousand of them. They find fellowship in one of the thousands of house churches.

Recognized churches in Iran are closed to converts from Islam and are not allowed to use the national language, Farsi. These churches are only open to the few thousand Assyrian and Armenian Christians and may only use their own ethnic languages.

## **“Better than weapons”**

Pars Theological Centre receives powerful testimonies of the fruit that their training and mentoring bring to Iranian Christians both inside and outside the country.

“Hundreds of Pars students are already leading Iranian churches and fellowships within Iran. Today, we have a unique opportunity to transform the heart of a nation. Billions of dollars invested in weapons and war cannot do what the gospel can accomplish for Iran. Nothing is more effective than supporting the growing

Iranian church by training its leaders,” says Mehrdad Fatehi, who leads Pars.

” Every day, Ali actively seeks to make a difference in his community, right in the midst of persecution.

*Robert Karami*

## **Afghan Testimony**

The online training also reaches Afghanistan. One Afghan Pars student chose to remain in his home country even after the Taliban came to power. For several months in 2025, he and his sister have been held in a Taliban prison. Efforts are underway to secure their release.

Robert Karami was himself imprisoned when he was a pastor in Iran. From London, he now mentors Ali. Karami shares:

“Even in the face of great danger, Ali has remained committed to his studies and mentoring sessions. He has learned to keep





Mehrdad Fatehi leads Pars.

Photo: Pars

Abbas Soori, Narges Nasri and Mehran Shamloui were summoned in April 2025 to begin serving sentences totalling over 40 years in prison.  
Photo: Article 18



### Pars Theological Centre

- Supported by Stefanus Alliance.
- Theological training, mentoring, and counselling.
- Iranian Christian students in Iran, Turkey, and other countries.
- Some Afghan students.
- Online teaching.
- Occasional conferences.
- 503 students (2024).
- Christian counselling via internet and phone.

Christian faith and action together. Every day, Ali actively seeks to make a difference in his community, right in the midst of persecution. Through our programme, he has grown even stronger in his resolve to remain steadfast on the Lord's path and to serve others with faith, love and humility—even in persecution. His courage inspires everyone who hears his story. Ali's testimony clearly demonstrates God's faithfulness and His power to unite believers across national and cultural boundaries. Through Pars, Ali has found not only education, but a community that understands, supports, and prays for the persecuted church in Afghanistan."



Scan the QR code with your phone camera. Read Pars' report on the growing church in Iran.

## HARSH SENTENCES

In 2024, 96 Christians in Iran were sentenced to a total of 263 years in prison. That is six times more than in 2023, when 22 Christians received a combined total of 43 years behind bars.

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The crackdown on Christians continued in 2025. That year, Narges Nasri, a pregnant Christian woman, was sentenced to 16 years in prison.

At least 123 Iranian Christians were arrested in 2024. But this is just "the tip of the iceberg," says the organisation Article 18, which documents the situation.

When three million court records from the Tehran area covering the years 2008 to 2023 were leaked in 2024, they included cases involving 300 Christians. They were prosecuted because of their faith or religious activities. Nearly 60 percent of these cases had not been known before.

It also became clear in 2024 that agents of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard have systematically begun targeting donations or money transfers to Christians in Iran from abroad.

If funds or transfers are discovered, harsh penalties follow.

The report "*The Tip of the Iceberg*" documents the persecution of Christians in Iran in 2024. It is produced by Article 18, CSW, Middle East Concern, and Open Doors.

” At least 123 Iranian Christians were arrested in 2024.



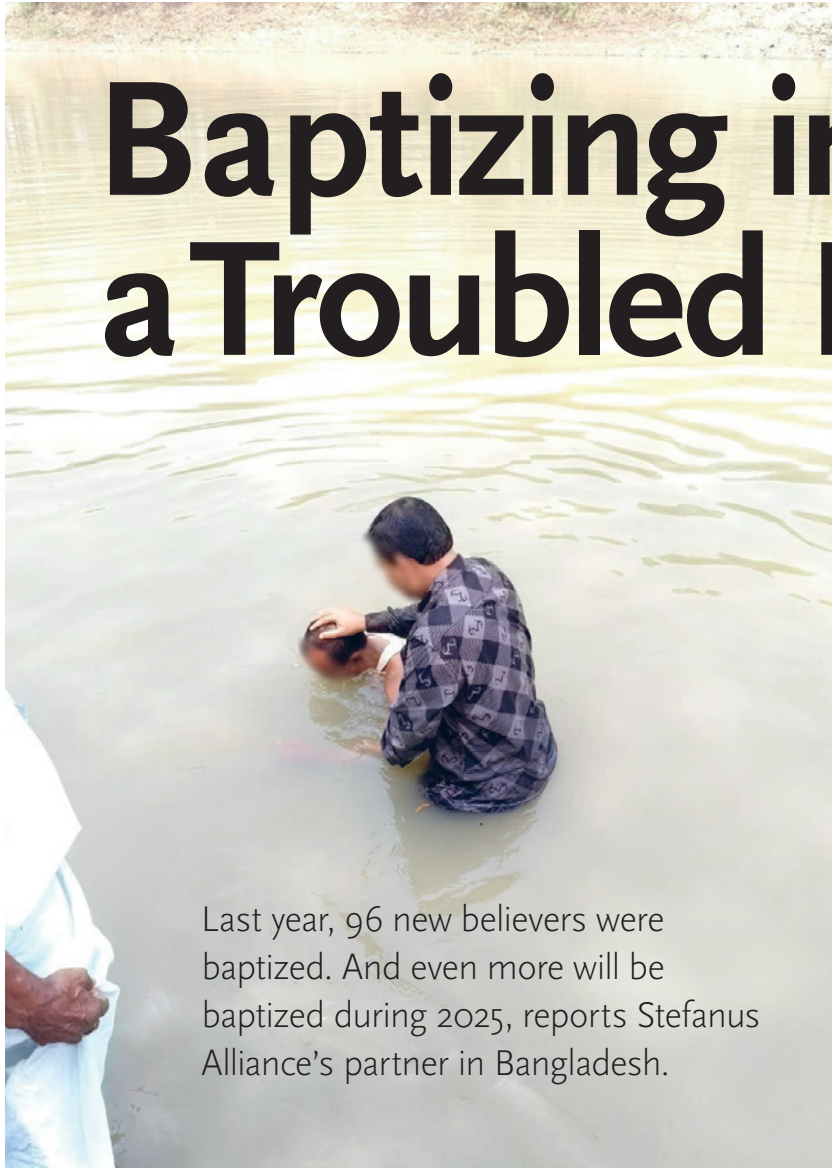
Scan the QR code with your phone camera to read the report. Stefanus Alliance supports Article 18, a key contributor to the report.





*A new believer is baptized. Photo: Stefanus Alliance partner*

# Baptizing in a Troubled Land



Last year, 96 new believers were baptized. And even more will be baptized during 2025, reports Stefanus Alliance's partner in Bangladesh.

"We thank God. Please pray for them," wrote the leader, Mehedi, when 52 were baptized in March 2025 and another 60 were due to be baptized locally.

Mehedi leads a network of house churches made up of Christians with a Muslim background. They believe in Isa (Jesus), but have retained elements of their Muslim culture.

Radical Muslims do not tolerate them. Several pastors have been attacked by Islamists, who gained more power after Prime Minister Hasina fled to India in August 2024 and a temporary government took over.

Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians have renewed their demand to remove Islam as the state religion and have called for better protection of minorities.

The women saw that evangelism is also their responsibility, not just the men's.

*Mehedi, pastor and network leader, Bangladesh*

"Bangladesh has moved into deep darkness," says Mehedi, whose real name we do not use for security reasons.

## Women in Fellowship

Stefanus Alliance supports training and mentoring of leaders. In February 2024, the network held its first seminar for women, with 37 participants.

"They realized they are not alone," Mehedi explains, and adds:

"The women saw that evangelism is also their responsibility, not just the men's. This is important in Bangladesh, where culturally it is easier for women to share the gospel. They are far more welcome into all homes than men are."

Now the women want to spend more time preaching the gospel and "not just do housework and care work" and "take orders from husbands and be disciplined by mothers- and fathers-in-law," the women said after the seminar.

## Putting Away Phones

In June 2024, 45 young people gathered for the first youth seminar. So far, seven of them have started youth ministry and shared the gospel with students and others. One of them reported in early 2025 that four people had come to faith.

Mehedi was pleasantly surprised that parents allowed their teenagers to travel up to 550 kilometres to attend the seminar—and that the youth themselves put away their mobile phones and paid close attention.

"We believe the seed of God's Word that we have planted in them will soon bear fruit in their lives," he says.



Equality Myanmar uses both films and gatherings to teach youth about human rights.  
Photo: Screenshot from EQMM

# Fighting the Junta and Disasters

Equality Myanmar (EQMM) provides human rights education, engages in political advocacy, and documents abuses. The organisation also offers critical emergency aid and protection to human rights activists, political activists, and their families.

Equality Myanmar has documented the scale of destruction following the earthquakes on 28 March 2025. While the junta appealed for international aid, airstrikes continued in many areas even after the earthquakes.

In 2024, EQMM carried out 13 training sessions on topics such as sexual violence in conflict, the rights of women and children, freedom of expression, and hate speech. In autumn 2024, an online human rights education programme was also conducted.

In spring 2024, 168 cases of human rights violations were documented. Thirteen were submitted to an international independent legal mechanism investigating crimes in Myanmar, and to the government-in-exile formed after the coup on 1 February 2021.

EQMM, founded in exile in 2000, was able to move its work into Myanmar in 2013 when the country opened up. But after the coup, they were forced to flee and have since resumed their work from exile in Thailand.

Stefanus Alliance has supported EQMM for over ten years in their mission to educate a civil society that can one day help build a democratic Myanmar.

## Educating Young Christians

Chin State in western Myanmar is the country's poorest state. Around 90 percent of the Chin people are Christians. Chin State was long the only state without its own university or college.

Chin Christian University (CCU) was established to provide young Chin people with higher education in economics and administration, aiming to strengthen local business and create job opportunities.

Since the military coup, CCU has not been able to hold classes on campus. Online teaching was chosen to reach even those students who joined the armed resistance. The absence of in-person interaction between teachers and students is deeply felt.

” We must wait for our country to have good governance, and we will do our part to help make that happen.

*Chin Christian University*

Teaching—and thus both learning outcomes and motivation—is affected by the frequent, unannounced internet shutdowns.

“As the situation stands, there's not much more we can do than what we're already doing. We must wait for our country to have good governance, and we will do our part to help make that happen,” writes CCU.



We meet women who endure mockery, financial abuse, and psychological pressure.

*Partner in Uzbekistan*

# Support in Deep Crisis

Women who convert to the Christian faith often need help coping with pressure from family and abusive husbands.



*Networks support women with leadership responsibilities and women facing pressure because of their faith.*

*Photo: Johannes Morken*

Stefanus Alliance works with several partners who are building churches for people who convert to Christianity. Part of this work includes supporting women in crisis.

## Women in Crisis

Pars Theological Centre, which provides theological training to Iranian Christians, also offers Christian counselling. Sixty percent of Iranian house churches are led by women. Women make up the clear majority of those seeking crisis support.

In 2024, Pars' counselling team provided 1,496 hours of Christian counselling to 217 people.

Living out one's Christian faith while maintaining family life with non-Christian relatives is especially difficult in a country where converts are persecuted and house churches may be raided by secret police.

Persecution often intensifies personal crises. Pars meets people struggling with anxiety and depression, and in some cases, suicidal thoughts. Some women sought counselling due to marital problems. Many feared discrimination at work.

## Healing from Trauma

An Iranian Christian woman receiving trauma support from Pars counsellor Rima after surviving rape shares:

"It was a completely new feeling to trust someone and at the same time be fully myself. Talking about the trauma and the rape and confronting the shameful memories has been difficult, but Rima's unwavering support and non-judgmental approach made it possible. (...) I am hopeful and believe that with Rima's



guidance, I will one day find peace and move beyond the trauma.”

### **Stress and Fear**

In Uzbekistan, another partner organisation faces many of the same challenges. Around 40 women who had recently converted received help in 2024 to cope with stress and fear, to resist pressure from family, relatives, neighbours, and co-workers—and to protect their children.

At eight seminars, topics included: the value of children, being a mother in difficult times, our relationship with God, and forgiveness.

### **Violent Husbands**

“We also help women suffering under aggressive and violent husbands—not just because of their Christian faith, but also due to how the men themselves were raised,” our partner says.

“We meet women who endure mockery, financial abuse, and psychological pressure from relatives trying to bring them back to their former faith. Sometimes they succeed.”

Others withstand the pressure.

“One woman (...) was pressured by her husband and mother-in-law to return to Islam and make her children wear the hijab and pray. She had to leave her home. Now she lives alone with six children, works, and provides for them. We have offered her counselling, prayed for her, and supported her with food and clothing.”

**Read more about Iran on pages 6–7.**

# **Worn-Out Find New Strength**

Pastors and their families are given two weeks of rest at the House of Joseph to regain strength in the face of persecution. In 2024, they welcomed 42 people from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and the northern Caucasus.

“Many are fearful and may have lost trust in the Lord. Some need to read the Word together. Others visit churches while staying at Josephs House, some share their testimonies. Others need private spiritual conversations.”

Many pastors are mentally exhausted. They are weighed down by fears of persecution and burdens for the church. When they are able to rest, they can also see their problems from the outside—and sometimes discover solutions.

“Many pastors and leaders are so busy working for the Lord that they serve without rest. For some, the stay at Josephs House is the first time in years they truly have free time and rest with their families. Some children say that ‘the church took their father.’ The children share that they have never spent so much time with their dad as they have at The House of Joseph. The fathers learn how important it is to spend more time with their children.”



The children share that they have never spent so much time with their dad as they have at Josephs House.



*In North Korea, being caught praying or with a Bible can lead to imprisonment in a labour camp. Thoroughly documented in the 2024 report “We Cannot Turn Away” by Stefanus Alliance’s partner CSW. Illustration: Emily Paik for CSW*

# Xi Wants to Stop Those Fleeing Kim

” We praise Him who faithfully keeps His promises to protect the widow, the fatherless, and the oppressed.

*Tim A. Peters*

Last year, 43 desperate North Korean refugees were helped out of China with support from Stefanus Alliance.

Helping Hands Korea (HHK) brought them to safety in South Korea. Before the end of April 2025, 11 new refugees had been rescued with our support.

“We are thrilled for every person we are able to help. At the same time, we feel the effects of increasing crackdowns in China,” says Tim A. Peters. Since 1996, he and HHK have helped nearly 3,000 people who fled to China.

## Churches Shut Down

In recent years, Xi Jinping’s police have intensified their crackdown on all religion. Among the many unreg-

istered churches that have been shut down are numerous Korean-Chinese churches along the border with North Korea. Brave Christians there have been key helpers for refugees fleeing Kim Jong-un’s dictatorship. But in China, refugees risk arrest and forced return.

“In several cases, refugees have been arrested just days before planned evacuations. This shows the severe tightening in China,” Peters explains.

Still, he is grateful for those HHK is able to save.

“We praise Him who faithfully keeps His promises to protect the widow, the fatherless, and the oppressed, despite the many dangers they face under Xi Jinping’s regime.”

## Father and Daughter Rescued

A disabled father and his daughter were among the 43 saved with

Stefanus funds in 2024. HHK rarely dares to evacuate men, fearing they may be sent to infiltrate refugee networks. But in this case, HHK chose to help.

The man’s wife fled to China in 2014 to earn a living. She was forcibly returned a year later and sentenced to three years in prison. She died in 2017 from malnutrition. Enraged at the regime, the man escaped with his daughter the following winter.

He worked odd jobs in China. One day, he fell at an unsecured construction site and was injured. Without ID papers, he couldn’t get proper medical treatment. To this day, he walks with a pronounced limp on a trembling leg.

A friend introduced him to a church that offered support. But one day, the man asked for help to get out. In April, they made

# Helping Secret Believers

A church in Seoul, South Korea, is supporting underground Christians inside North Korea. Funds from Stefanus Alliance are smuggled in. In 2024, nine families received food aid for an entire year – enough to help them survive.

Many Christians in North Korea live in isolation, afraid to share their faith with anyone they cannot fully trust. Christians belong to the lowest class in society and are among those who receive the least—or nothing—of the country's public resources.

"We deeply thank all who continue to pray for and serve underground Christians in North Korea, in the love of Jesus Christ," the organisation writes.

The church also helps refugees struggling to cope with the sudden freedom in a materialistic South Korea.



*A church in Seoul supports refugees in Seoul and underground Christians in North Korea.*

*Photo: Heidi Aanensen*



*Tim A. Peters has helped North Korean refugees for nearly 30 years.*  
*Photo: Bjørn A. Wegge*

it to Laos. "Then they were finally free from the constant fear of the Kim regime and Xi Jinping's surveillance state," writes Peters.

## **Stateless Children**

Many North Korean women fleeing to China are subjected to human trafficking and forced marriages. The children born in these circumstances become stateless. With support from Stefanus Alliance, 45 of these children received stipends in 2024 to cover living costs and schooling.

# Documenting Kim's Abuses

A brutal North Korean detention centre has been subjected to EU sanctions because of severe abuse, including crimes against Christian women.

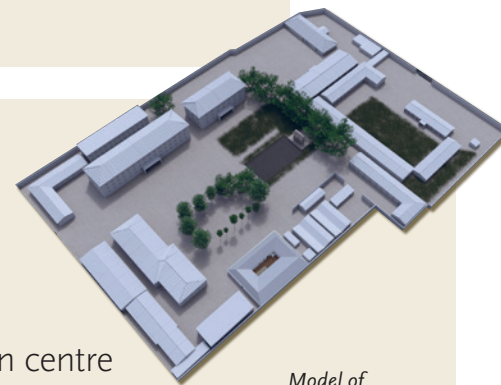
The sanctions were introduced in 2024 after thorough documentation by the organisation Korea Future, whose work was supported by our alliance. The findings are based on extensive interviews with defectors.

"We are proud that this is the first time a civil society organisation has documented evidence that has led to sanctions for human rights violations in North Korea," writes Korea Future.

The detention centre in Onsong is run by the Ministry of State Security (MSS). The responsible minister was also sanctioned.

MSS identifies, imprisons, and punishes individuals it considers a threat to "ideological purity." Christians are seen as an especially dangerous threat.

In large prison facilities, Christians and other believers are subjected to psychological torture, water torture, and electric shocks. Some have been forced to witness executions. Women suspected of Christian faith have been subjected to sexual violence and forced abortions, according to Korea Future's documentation.



*Model of the detention centre in Onsong.*  
*Photo: Korea Future.*





*Pastor Ramazan Arkan and Antalya Church gathered 800 people for the Easter Day 2025 service, in addition to their regular members.*

*Photo: Antalya Evangelical Church*

# The Church Baptizes. The Regime Blacklists.

While the church continues reaching new people with the gospel, the Erdoğan regime is intensifying its deportation of foreign Christians active in local congregations.

In total, Antalya Evangelical Church reached 2,300 people (outside their regular congregations) with the gospel during Easter and Christmas 2024 and Easter 2025. These outreach events were held outside church premises. At the Easter Day 2025 service alone, 750 New Testaments were distributed.

## **Inviting Tens of Thousands**

Tens of thousands of invitations were handed out in the lead-up to the Christmas 2024 event. Another 40,000 invitations were distributed ahead of Easter Day 2025. This also resulted in numerous threatening phone calls and slurs. Police provided extra security and searched the venue with dogs to ensure safety.

Antalya Church rejoices that 18 new believers were baptized in 2024 after thorough baptismal preparation. In June 2025, another 19 were baptized.

The church holds services and other activities in three different locations in the

city. An estimated 500 people dropped by the open church premises during 2024—giving them a chance to encounter the gospel and the church. Many also connect through social media.

## **Expelled from Turkey**

However, deep concern is growing as authorities intensified efforts in mid-December 2024 to expel foreign missionaries. They are assigned codes marking them as threats to public security (N-82), even though they have had no issues with the authorities. These individuals are either forced to leave the country or are denied re-entry if abroad when the code is assigned. Since 2019, at least 170 people have received such codes in Turkey—plus nearly 400 family members.

“This doesn’t seem to be stopping,” says Senior Pastor Ramazan Arkan of Antalya Evangelical Church. He also leads the Protestant Alliance (TEK), a network of over 200 churches and fellowships.

This winter, Ramazan shared the dire situation at an event at the UN headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, held alongside a session of the UN Human Rights





Council. The event was organized by the World Evangelical Alliance and gave Ramazan many new contacts.

### Raising Local Leaders

The loss of church workers is increasing the burden on local leaders, as foreign staff have played a major role for many years. All foreigners, along with their families, live with deep anxiety that they could be next. And more and more are receiving such notices.

Pastor Ramazan says churches now must intensify efforts to train local leaders. Antalya Church is already underway, and others need to follow.

“The situation is concerning for both churches and the families affected. Foreign Christians being forced to leave is a loss. But over time, the training of local leaders will strengthen the church,” says Ramazan Arkan.

### Work in Turkey

- Antalya Evangelical Church – Church planting
- Karatas Church in Izmir – Church planting
- Protestant Alliance (TEK) – Documentation of violations of religious freedom
- Syriac Orthodox Church in Mardin – Preserving culture and Christian heritage in Tur Abdin, once a Christian stronghold before 1915

The situation is concerning for both churches and the families affected.

*Ramazan Arkan*





# 'We Are Few, But Not Powerless'

I'm grateful for your years of faithful support. I would like to share some reflections on the situation of the small Christian minority in Iraq.

*Dear friends in Stefanus Alliance,*

Forty years ago, Christians made up 1 percent of Iraq's population of 23 million. Today, we represent no more than 0.6 percent of 44 million. This is a shocking reality.

Many left during the civil war after the U.S. invasion in 2003. Then came ISIS in 2014. Since then, Capni and I have been fully engaged in helping survivors rebuild their lives.

Today, Christians are found in only seven of Iraq's 18 provinces—and active Christian communities in just three. All three are here in the north—in the Kurdish region and the neighbouring Nineveh Plain.

## Islamisation

As Christians, we naturally enough focus on the problems. Not only are we few, but we also have little influence: Christians have only symbolic political representation. Even though Iraq is not officially governed by sharia law, both daily life and legislation are shaped by it. Children are being islamized, and the law automatically classifies minors as Muslims if one parent converts for any reason.

Cities like Telkeif and Mosul are lost to Christians. In other parts of the Nineveh Plain, our Christian presence is weakening while other groups are gaining ground.

I'm also saddened that we have struggled to build an ecumenical community among the churches. Our problems are very real.

## The Role of Christians

But we speak far too little about the many opportunities Christians have. Even though we may never regain our former demographic size, we must reclaim our role in society through education, health-care, and humanitarian work. Our contributions in these areas have helped people regardless of faith and created a positive image of Christians.

Our greatest strength as Iraqi Christians is that we belong here. We are the indigenous people. Christians have been here for 2,000 years. We were here long before those who now make up the majority. Our ethnic-national presence as Assyrians goes back thousands of years. We have no other homeland than Iraq.

We also have Christian towns and villages. We can launch projects

that improve living conditions for Christians and strengthen their ties to the land and their position where they live.

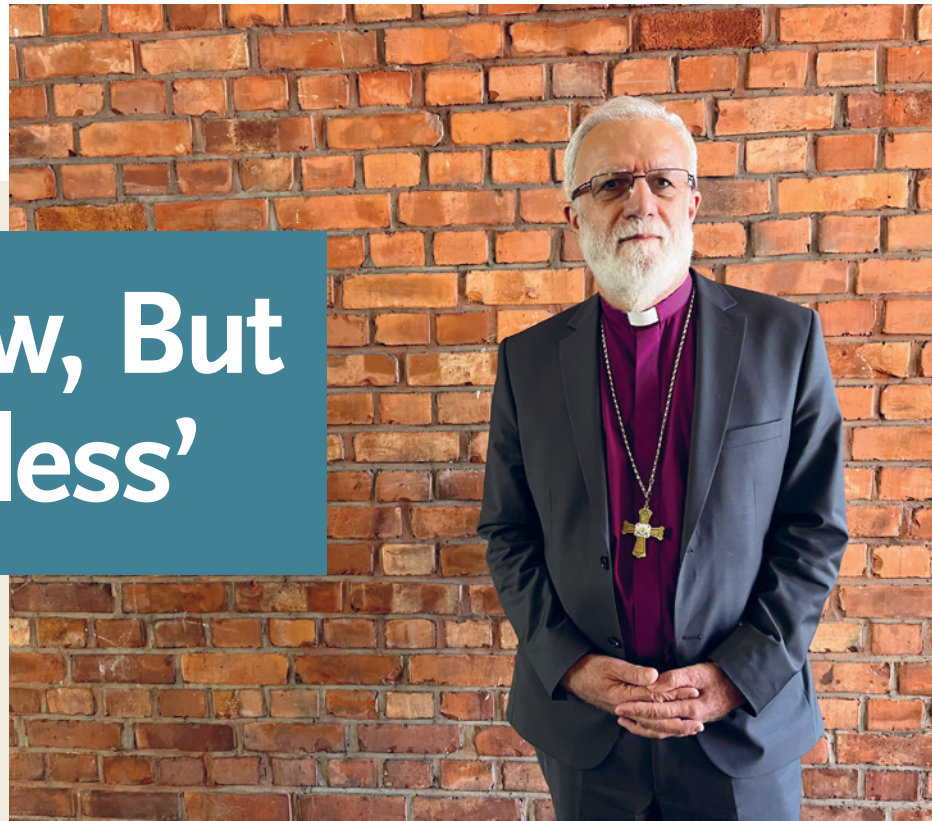
## Don't Leave—Stay in Iraq

Our third strength is the Iraqi Christian diaspora. Used in the right way, it holds great potential. But the question is: will the diaspora continue to inspire more people to leave Iraq, as many do? Or can it be used to support Christians who want to stay? A diaspora remains a diaspora only as long as there is a homeland. The day that homeland no longer exists, the diaspora ceases to be a diaspora.

Our fourth strength in preserving our homeland is you—our partners, friends who faithfully support us in strengthening the Christian presence in Iraq and working for equal civil rights for all.

Thank you!

*Warm regards,  
Emanuel Youkhana  
Director of Capni, Iraq*





Emanuel Youkhana has declared that he will not leave his work in Iraq until ISIS and its ideology are gone.  
Photo: Johannes Morken

” Our greatest strength as Iraqi Christians is that we are the indigenous people.

Emanuel Youkhana

## Supporting the Yezidis' Struggle

In 2025, Stefanus Alliance is running a pilot project in partnership with the Free Yezidi Foundation. The Yezidis are fighting for survival after the 2014 genocide.

A highly qualified team provides mental health and psychosocial support to dozens of vulnerable Yezidi women who survived sexual and gender-based violence under ISIS.

One hundred women take part in recreational activities with psychosocial support—such as trauma-informed yoga, art, crafts, and sports. They are reconnecting with their own bodies, finding emotional healing in a safe space, combating the stigma of being survivors of abuse, and learning techniques to manage stress.

Fifty Yezidi women will receive legal aid, including help in applying for compensation under the Yezidi Survivors Law. This law was passed by Iraq's parliament in Baghdad on 1 March 2021 to support Yezidi women who escaped ISIS captivity. However, the law has proven difficult to access, and many survivors need the kind of support that the Free Yezidi Foundation can provide.

## For Climate, Rights, and Faith

Here are some glimpses from the projects of our partner in Duhok, northern Iraq:



Farmers in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq are learning to grow food—like tomatoes—using as little water as possible.  
Photo: Christine Gripsgård Lunga

**Climate and Environment:** The climate crisis is hitting Iraq hard. Land that was fertile three to four decades ago is drying out. Large rivers have shrunk to a trickle. Yet the crisis ranks low on the agenda for both authorities and the wider society. Our partner is taking action:

- Teaching farmers sustainable agriculture
- Planting trees to combat deforestation
- Installing irrigation systems to reduce water use
- Running campaigns for cleaner neighbourhoods and less waste

In 2024, three gatherings were held to raise awareness about climate challenges and teach people to use resources more wisely.

**Livelihoods:** Small loans and guarantees help people earn a living. Some receive sheep, which provide both food and income.

**Minority Rights:** A report was produced on discrimination, social exclusion, and minorities' limited access to public services. It was shared with decision-makers, activists, and NGOs to help strengthen minority rights.

A podcast gives religious minorities space to share their experiences with discrimination and threats—and to share hope.

**Christian Faith:** Support is given to youth activities in the Chaldean Catholic Church (the largest church community). The aim is to inspire young people to develop Christian character, be inspired by Jesus, and live out Christian values.



# Increasingly Vulnerable

State actors are involved in most violations of religious freedom affecting Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in Sri Lanka.



NCEASL lights candles to spread hope in a country where minorities are becoming increasingly vulnerable. Photo: NCEASL

## Work in Sri Lanka

- National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) – umbrella organisation for evangelical churches.
- Stefanus Alliance supports NCEASL's work on religious freedom.
- NCEASL uses our “Local Changemakers Course” in areas with religious persecution and ethnic-religious unrest.

” Christians, who were targets of the 2019 terror attacks, are frustrated that no one has been held accountable.

*Mike Gabriel, NCEASL*

“We are witnessing a serious breakdown in the rule of law when it comes to religious freedom,” concludes the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL).

In the report “From Fear to Violence,” lawyers analysed over 100 attacks based on religious identity from November 2023 to October 2024.

## From Fear to Violence

Religious leaders from the Buddhist majority spread fear of minorities. That fear leads to violence.

- Christians outside the recognized churches face restrictions on worship services. They are accused of evangelising to convert Buddhists.
- Muslims are attacked for wearing hijab or having long beards. The fear centres on Muslim population growth and ideological influence.
- Hindus are harassed, arbitrarily arrested, subjected to property damage and physical violence in disputes over sacred sites.

## The State Is Behind It

State actors are involved in the vast majority of these attacks—often the police. This happens based on “an ingrained belief that the state must protect the majority.”

“Without the state’s involvement—through inaction, discrimination, threats and harassment, arbitrary arrests and even physical violence—it would be difficult to carry out religiously motivated attacks on Christians, Muslims, and Hindus,” the report states.

State officials responsible for violations against religious minorities



# Christmas Brings Hope

Stephen's Children extends a helping hand to poor Coptic children in Cairo's "garbage cities."



*Stephen's Children, founded by Mama Maggie, helps children discover their Coptic identity. Photo: Christine Gripsgård Lunga*

Through home visits, preschools, primary schools, a vocational school, camps, and healthcare services, the children come to understand their worth and dignity—and they find hope.

At Christmas, a particularly important time, clothes and shoes made at the vocational school were distributed. The children received gifts—new clothes for the coming year.

Families received boxes filled with oil, rice, and eggs.

Christmas is also a time to teach children about their Coptic identity. Many who live and work on the garbage dumps were born into the Coptic Church, but do not know what this identity means. Faith formation is essential.

In the preschools and schools, the children learn a new Bible story each week. They read the story, sing songs, draw, make crafts, and perform skits. That's why the children remember the Bible stories—as guides for life.

go unpunished. The report calls for an independent body to prosecute civil servants responsible for religious freedom violations.

## **Worse for Christians and Muslims**

At Easter in 2019, three churches and three hotels in the capital Colombo were hit by suicide bombers, killing at least 290 people. Islamic extremists were suspected.

"Since then, Muslims have faced increased surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and growing public mistrust. Christians, who were targets of the terror attacks, are frustrated that no one has been held accountable—while there are even claims that the state was involved. Minorities are feeling more and more vulnerable," says Mike Gabriel from NCEASL.



Scan the QR code with your phone camera to read the report on religious freedom violations in Sri Lanka.

# Climate, Hope and Faith at Anafora

Anafora is a centre of strength for the Coptic minority. It was founded by Bishop Thomas over 20 years ago.

It is a retreat, conference, and education centre north of Cairo. Stefanus Alliance has especially supported the development of the Anastasia education centre.

Anafora is also a pioneer in organic farming and solar energy, contributing to more climate-friendly solutions.



*Anafora is increasingly using solar panels. Photo: Christine Gripsgård Lunga*





# Love Against Hate



*Procmura brings women together to teach about religious freedom and women's rights.  
Photo: Procmura*

” Instead of looking down on her marriage to a Christian, the family now admires Halima’s courage and her ability to stand firm in her faith.

Is there light in those parts of Africa where Islamist terror spreads death and fear, and where extremists fuel division over religion?

Through the organisation Procmura, Stefanus Alliance has witnessed strong commitment to religious freedom in several local communities in Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria.

The event “Celebration of Religious Diversity”, held in each of the three countries in 2024, gathered a total of 420 participants. The organisers had only expected 25 at each.

One highlight was a peace meal shared by Muslims from northern Kaduna and Christians from southern Kaduna. Kaduna is a terror-stricken state in Nigeria. Seeing people from opposing sides of a violent conflict sit down to eat together became a powerful symbol of peace and mutual respect.

## Halima’s Story

Procmura is building a growing network of religious freedom educators across Africa. Many bring their own stories of oppression or discrimination because of their faith.

When Halima, a Muslim, married a Christian man, she was cast out by her family and cut off from her social circles.

At an interfaith Procmura seminar on religious freedom, Halima realized that her family and friends – without knowing it – were violating her right to religious freedom.

Inspired by stories of change and new insights, Halima took the initiative to start conversations with her family – about mutual respect

and the right to choose a life partner across religious lines. Bit by bit, she noticed a shift.

Today, Halima says her relationship with her family is better than ever. Instead of looking down on her marriage to a Christian, her family now treats her husband with respect and admires Halima’s courage and her ability to stand firm in her faith within an interreligious marriage.

## Procmura

- Christian organisation founded in 1959
- Promotes peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims
- Based in Nairobi, Kenya
- Projects in around 20 African countries



*Religious freedom during war was one of the topics at an Adyan conference on freedom of religion.*

*Photo: Adyan Foundation*

# Religious Freedom in a Time of War

A Christian woman in Lebanon shares how education in religious freedom transformed her –and it became especially evident during last year’s war.

After participating in a course on how to train others in religious freedom, she became deeply aware of the importance of openness and acceptance. When people were displaced by the war in Lebanon last year, she opened her home to Muslims who had been forced to flee. There, they experienced a space where diversity of thought, culture, and faith was respected and embraced.

This is just one of many stories bearing witness to the impact of Adyan’s work in Lebanon. Adyan is Stefanus Alliance’s largest partner. The war and the bombing of Beirut caused some activities to be postponed from 2024 to 2025 – but the staff quickly mobilized again once the ceasefire was in place.

This year, Adyan has published six podcasts on religious freedom. One of them asks: “What happens to religious freedom during war and when people are displaced?”

Adyan has translated and adapted Stefanus Alliance’s digital training resources for use in the Middle East and North Africa. Among other achievements, Adyan has developed a comprehensive online platform with resources and created a regional charter on religious freedom.

## Adyan Foundation

- Founded by a Christian and a Muslim in Lebanon in 2006.
- Projects across the Middle East and North Africa.
- Works for diversity, mutual understanding, inclusive citizenship, sustainable peace, and spiritual solidarity.

## Training the Trainers

In 2024, Adyan ran two online courses, each with 10 participants from different countries and religious backgrounds. They learned about religious freedom and how to promote and teach it in their local communities – where human rights are often a sensitive topic.

The first course was for activists; the second was for filmmakers, poets, musicians, graphic artists, dramatists, and other artists.

After completing such courses, participants join a network of educators in religious freedom. They are then expected to take initiative and teach in their own communities. In 2024, the network reached a total of 1,470 people.

**When people were displaced by the war in Lebanon, she – as a Christian – opened her home to Muslims who had been forced from theirs.**



Since its start in 2003, Felix Corley has edited Forum 18 News Service, which is supported by Stefanus Alliance.  
Photo: Johannes Morken



## Putin Cracks Down on Religious Freedom

Vladimir Putin's wars have been accompanied by a heavy tightening of religious freedom.

"There are increasingly strict rules on where religious communities in Russia can meet, what literature they can use, and where they can share their faith publicly. Putin has banned several religious groups," says Felix Corley, editor of Forum 18 News Service.

### Worsening Situation

Forum 18 monitors violations of religious freedom in countries that were part of the former Soviet Union. With limited resources, they publish reports for lawyers, civil society, governments, and others.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many who have criticized the war from a religious standpoint have been fined or imprisoned.

### Sent to Labour Camp

Russia enforces restrictions in occupied parts of Ukraine. Forum 18 reports that three Protestant

churches and the Greek Catholic Church have been banned. At least 69 pastors and priests have been killed. Church buildings have been closed or taken over by Russian soldiers.

Both Orthodox churches in Ukraine are under heavy pressure to join new Russian dioceses. In February 2025, a priest from the Moscow Patriarchate was sent to a Russian labour camp to serve a 14-year sentence for "espionage." In February of the previous year, the body of a priest from the independent Ukrainian church was found in the street.

### Copying Putin

In Central Asia, many Muslims are imprisoned for "extremism" without having incited or committed violence.

Georgia and several Central Asian countries have adopted laws labelling organisations receiving foreign support as "agents"—copies of a Russian law used to undermine independent civil society.

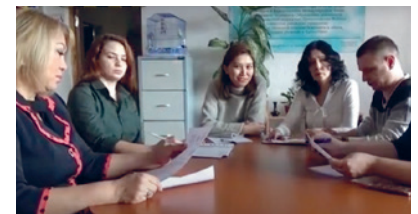
## Legal Support for Religious Freedom

Stefanus Alliance supports several initiatives providing legal protection for freedom of religion or belief. Some engage with governments and law-making, others support congregations or individuals. Examples include:

**Kurdistan Region of Iraq:** The Kurdistan Centre for International Law developed a manual for lawyers in 2024. Two training sessions were held—in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah—with 36 lawyers participating. The goal: to increase awareness and competence in handling religious freedom cases.

**Kyrgyzstan:** A religious studies research centre held training for lawyers and religious leaders to strengthen their capacity on religious freedom issues. The initiative has led to dialogue with authorities on legal reforms.

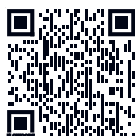
**Kazakhstan:** The Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law is the only human rights organisation in the country working on freedom of religion. Its goal is to encourage both government and civil society to respect, protect, and promote freedom of religion and belief and non-discrimination. A brochure has been developed in Russian and Kazakh with an overview of key national and international organisations that believers can turn to for help—including foundations offering assistance to victims.



Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law is the country's only human rights organisation working with religious freedom.  
Photo: Screenshot from bureau.kz

” Restrictions on freedom of religion and belief have increased in Russia.

Felix Corley



Scan the QR code with your phone camera to access Forum 18 News Service.





Secretary General Ed Brown speaks at a meeting of the Article 18 Alliance.  
Photo: Article 18 Alliance

## New Teaching Resource

Stefanus Alliance has published a new teaching booklet:

- “*Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Expression*”. It covers topics such as blasphemy, hate speech against minorities, and restrictions on missionary activity.
- “*Freedom of Religion for All*” has been published in more than a dozen languages since 2012.
- “*Freedom of Religion for All: Focus on Women*” (2021) was available in English, Arabic, and French before being published in Norwegian in 2024 and in Urdu in 2025.



New teaching booklet on freedom of religion and freedom of expression.



Booklet on freedom of religion and women—now also available in Urdu.

## On Many Global Stages

Stefanus Alliance is increasingly called on to contribute in global arenas promoting international religious freedom. Highlights include:

- Training on religious freedom and gender for 30 diplomats ahead of the 2024 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Berlin.
- Training on religious freedom for EU diplomats in Brussels.
- A professional seminar at Norad on religious freedom and gender equality.

- Participation in a digital UN panel on violence against women for the UN Day for Victims of Religious-Based Violence (22 August 2024).
- Secretary General Ed Brown sits on the expert panel for the Article 18 Alliance – a diplomatic coalition for religious freedom with around 40 member countries. He participated in meetings in Geneva, where Stefanus Alliance’s materials on women and religious freedom were promoted.
- Participation in the *Christians Against All Persecution* conference in Dallas, USA.



Stefanus Alliance is a missions and human rights organisation with a particular focus on religious freedom. The organisation was founded in November 1967 as Mission Behind the Iron Curtain, supporting Christians in communist countries. From 1990 to 2011, it was called Norwegian Mission in the East, before the name was changed to Stefanus Alliance in 2012.

Visit our website to read about our history, statutes, and learn more about our work for mission and religious freedom. There you will also find information about staff and elected representatives, the Annual Accounts, the Board's Report on Operations, and the Auditor's Statement.



You can also scan the QR code with your mobile camera.

[stefanus-usa.org/about](https://stefanus-usa.org/about)

### Stefanus Alliance

P.O. Box 6603  
0502 Oslo, Norway  
Phone: +47 23 40 88 00  
Email: [post@stefanus.no](mailto:post@stefanus.no)



Stefanus Alliance USA  
PO Box 77160,  
Corona,  
Ca 92883

Stefanus Alliance USA is a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with the Internal Revenue Service, Tax identification number: 88-2560431

Editor: Johannes Morken  
Design: Von / Bendik Schøien  
Printing: Kai Hansen Trykkeri



To me, the Stefanus Prize is not only an honour. It also carries a responsibility.

*Aiman Umarova*

# Gratitude for the Stefanus Prize

Lawyer Aiman Umarova from Kazakhstan received the Stefanus Prize during a ceremony in Oslo in May 2024. One year later, she sends this message:

“The Stefanus Prize was not only a recognition of my work, but also a strong encouragement to continue supporting and protecting those who need it the most. My visit to Oslo gave me memories that will stay with me forever. Back home, I was congratulated by many – even by the president.

The Stefanus Prize has brought more attention to human rights issues and to my work. I now see that some public officials have started to consider my position in human rights cases.

Like any form of recognition, the prize has been met with both support and scepticism. Some have questioned whether such a prize can really make a difference; others have criticized my work or intentions. When you stand up for human rights, criticism is inevitable. The most important thing is that the conversation continues and that more

people become aware of these vital issues.

At the moment, I am involved in several criminal cases, including some where women and girls have been subjected to sexual abuse within their own families – under the guise of religion. The prize money has been used for training survivors and for educating police officers and psychologists who work with children. Psychologists have also had their salaries covered during investigations and trials. I have also supported children with travel costs, food, and shelter at temporary protection centres in cases where their fathers have been the perpetrators.

To me, the Stefanus Prize is not only an honour. It also carries a responsibility. I remain focused on my mission, regardless of those who are sceptical.”



*Aiman Umarova (second from right) received the Stefanus Prize from then Minister of International Development Anne Beathe Tvinneim. Also pictured: Bishop Ingeborg Midttømme, head of the prize committee, and committee member Gregory Reichberg.*  
Photo: Johannes Morken

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