# Annual Report 2025-2026

stefanus alliance international

until it is safe to believe



**Our calling is to be witnesses to the hope in Jesus Christ, help the discriminated and persecuted, and share knowledge about the universal right to freedom of religion and belief – until it is safe to believe.**

*The Message of Easter: Dance and choir singing during a large Easter event hosted by Antalya Evangelical Church in 2026. Photo: Antalya Evangelical Church.*

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# Dangerous Turning Point

## Who helps those who have become lunch items on the dictators' menu?

Canadian prime minister Mark Carney was praised for his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos. He described the consequences of a rule-based international order breaking down, while authoritarian rulers try to divide the world amongst themselves. Carney also said: "If we are not at the table, we are on the menu."

Geopolitically, that was an astute observation. But Carney himself, and other Western leaders, have gone to the dictatorship of China seeking new deals on trade. The world needs trade agreements. But who helps those in authoritarian nations, who are not seated at the table but have long ago ended up on the dictator's lunch menu?

**Hatred and Violence in India**

While Christians and Muslims are exposed to increased hatred and violence in Modi's India, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen lifted Modi's hand to celebrate a new trade agreement.

In Norway, the government welcomed Modi in May 2025 without mentioning human rights at all. In 2026, the same government may make a trade agreement with Vietnam, and Stefanus Alliance International has challenged the Norwegian government to clarify what place human rights will have in the agreement. (We also asked about the trade agreement with India, without answer.) In Vietnam, Christians and other prisoners of conscience are convicted of prison sentences as long as 12 years. One of them is a former partner of ours. These brave activists have no seat at the table in Hanoi – they are clearly on the dictator's lunch menu. They need our support.

**China tightening the reins**

In April 2025, the Stefanus Alliance International board of directors visited partners in Seoul, South Korea. The ministry partners we met there help the North Korean underground church and assist desperate North Korean refugees. Their work has become more important, and even more difficult. Xi Jinping's iron grip is increasingly also affecting the underground churches that help desperate refugees from Kim Jong-un's dictatorship. We feel a responsibility to support those who are helping, and to speak up on behalf of persecuted victims of both the North Korean and Chinese dictatorships.

**Hope in the Face of Power**

In this annual report, you can read selected stories about the broad ministry Stefanus Alliance International is involved in. Several of our partners document abuses of power against Christians and other minorities. Stefanus Alliance International is working to raise the issue of religious freedom in political agendas around the world.

Many of our partners help those who are impacted by tightening restrictions and human rights violations. Stefanus Alliance International is part of a large effort to share knowledge about the freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) as a basic human right – and our partners around the world, particularly in the Middle East, say it makes a genuine difference.

Other partners are building Christian communities and churches in countries where the right to freedom of religion is violated, and minorities are persecuted. We feel a particularly strong need to highlight both our partners who are building the underground Church in the tyranny of Iran, and those who are building the Church in countries that this year have suffered from war. They need our support and our prayers.

Together with many others, we fight for a world that is different from the one desired by authoritarian rulers and ruthless dictators. Our calling is to be witnesses to the hope in Jesus Christ, help those who suffer discrimination and persecution, and share knowledge about the universal right to freedom of religion and belief – until it is safe to believe.

Oslo, June 2026



Anne Mari Schiager Topland
**CHAIR OF THE BOARD**



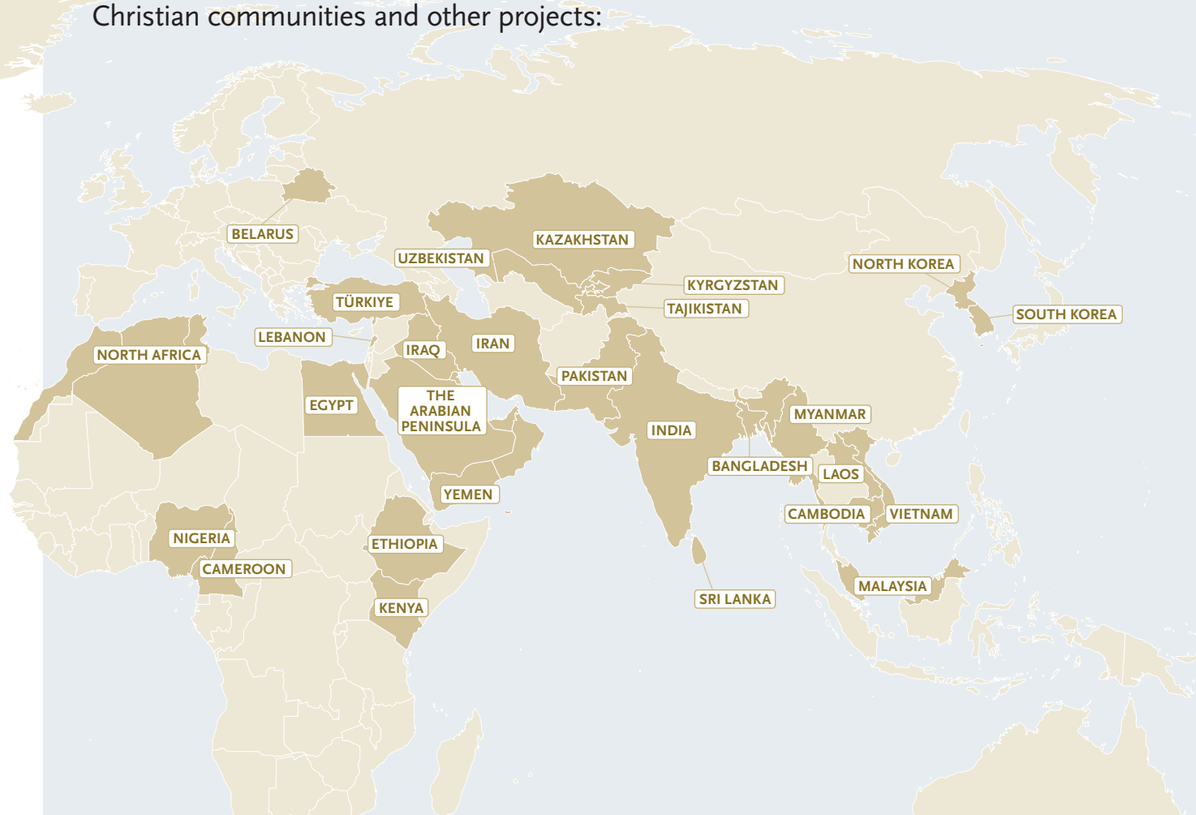
Ed Brown
**PRESIDENT**





# Where we work

These are the countries and regions where Stefanus Alliance International supports active Christian communities and other projects:




In addition to the countries listed, we host physical and digital classes and conferences that support people working in countries not listed on this map. Also, our partners at Adyan Foundation in Lebanon use courses developed by us, translated and adapted to Middle Eastern and North African contexts. They reach many, particularly in the northern half of Africa and the Levant. Digital resources about the freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) and legal aid resources for attorneys and legislators are also used by many.

We are also part of international networks that provide broad information access outside the listed countries. Partner organizations like CSW, Forum 18 News Service, and Middle East Concern document global concerns and violations of the freedom of religion or belief.



*Mehrdad Fatehi thinks the church growth in Iran will be a shock to the Middle East. Photo: Johannes Morken.*

# ‘A Hidden Church Will Grow Even More’

For Christians in Iran’s underground churches, theological education is too important to let it go. This year, the war placed degrees on hold.

Pars Theological Centre educates leaders for the Iranian underground church and Iranian churches in other countries. 250 of their students – approximately half the student body – reside inside Iran.

Pars students were among those who participated in the country-wide protests against the Islamic regime in January. At least 22 Christians are confirmed to be among the more than 34 500 people killed in the massacres. Since the regime shut down internet and cell phone networks to cover up their own brutality, the full impact on the underground church, and their student body, remains unknown.

**Help for trauma**

Pars has made contact with several in their community who have shared about their needs. As always, Pars staff have offered trauma healing and counseling.

When war came at the end of February, internet and cell networks were once again shut down, making online studies impossible. Pars responded by making the semester optional, without impacting students’ progress toward Bachelor’s degrees.

“It is a very desperate situation. If our students lose their studies, they lose one more piece bit of hope. That cannot happen. So we are laying plans to help students complete their studies, regardless of whether the internet returns,” says Mehrdad Fatehi. He founded Pars in 2010. The center, which he currently directs, is located in a city southwest of London.

**Unstable network**

Until four or five years ago, students inside Iran received curriculum, resources, and assignments on small SD cards, secretly distributed by participants at Christian conferences outside Iran. But in order to handle a growing student body both in- and outside Iran, the entire degree program is now gathered on a secure digital portal for all students.

Due to inconsistent internet access, Pars may need to return to past solutions – gathering curriculum, videos, readings, and assignments which are transferred in a single download using an encrypted app, students answering assignments offline, and sending completed assignments back to Pars – a process that only requires students to access the internet twice per semester.

> If our students lose their studies, they lose one more piece of hope. That cannot happen.
>
> *Mehrdad Fatehi*

**“A shock for the Middle East”**

Pars director Fatehi challenges us to pray for the Islamist regime to lose its grip and surrender to demands for regime change: “Pray for a just and peaceful transition, for the good of the whole community. Pray for a deep spiritual fellowship among believers in house churches in Iran. Pray they remain steadfast in love of neighbor, enduring in hope and a faithful witness amid uncertainty and war. Pray for wisdom, courage and unity among the leaders of the Iranian church, both in Iran and in the diaspora.”

Fatehi, who himself converted from Islam several years prior to the 1979 revolution, believes the day the regime falls, the church in Iran will grow even more:

“It will be a shock to the Middle East when in Iran, which is today a Shia Islamic dictatorship, even more people will come to faith in Christ if given the opportunity."





# A Record Year for Arrests

At least 254 Iranian Christians were arrested in 2025, nearly twice as many as the year before.
Most of the arrests occurred after the war in June 2025, as the regime was looking for scapegoats among Christians and Baha’is. That is according to the annual report from our partner Article 18, titled “Scapegoats”.

**More findings from the 2025 report:**

- Christians receive longer and longer punishments.
- Fewer were sentenced to prison in 2025 than in the year prior – 73 versus 96.
- The total length of prison sentences in 2025 was 280 years, up from 263 in 2024.
- At least 11 Christians were sentenced to at least ten years prison in 2025.
- 21 Christians were put in prison for Bible distribution.
- In 2025, the Revolutionary Guard took on a more central role in the arrests of Christians. The guard considers owning a Bible to be an offense to the Islamic Republic.
- 43 Christians were in prison at the end of 2025. Additionally, at least 16 were in custody.
- There were several cases of severe abuse while in custody.

Since the war between the United States and Israel broke out in late February 2026, several heads of Iranian house churches have been arrested.

Article 18 is currently finalizing work to gather all known cases of criminal persecution of Christians in Iran into a searchable database. In the first stage, all current cases as of 2025 will be entered.



*Mansour Borji directs Article 18, a partner organization supported by Stefanus Alliance International. Photo: Johannes Morken.*

**Read more**
You can read more stories of Christians in Iran on Article 18’s website, www.articleeighteen.com.

# The Fight Against Violence



*Vijayesh Lal of Evangelical Fellowship of India proclaims Christ peacefully, in a nation where hatred grows. Photo: Johannes Morken.*

Hateful rhetoric against Christians is spread from the very top of Indian society. That translates to a major rise in the number of verbal and physical attacks.

January 2, 2025: In the village of Bade Bodal in the Bastar district of the Chhattisgarh state, the 25-year-old Christian woman Kunika Kashyap experienced tragedy. She was six months pregnant. The village leader attacked her physically. Kunika was beaten with a wooden rod, strangled, and beaten across her chest and belly. She was taken to the district hospital where she suffered a miscarriage. The police refused to register her case.

**Growing animosity**

This is only one of 747 verified attacks on Christians in India last year, documented by the umbrella organization Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), who have a commission for freedom of religion and belief. Their report shows how animosity, harassment, violence, and discrimination directed toward Christians is growing in all of India, not only in large states in northern and central India. All over the country, social animosity is growing and India is becoming increasingly polarized.

The report documents that in India, anti-Christian propaganda is working.

EFI is concerned about the increased violence against indigenous groups in parts of Chhattisgarh, such as where Kunika and her unborn child became victims. Prayer meetings and church services are also broken up.

> Stefanus Alliance International's friends in India ask the outside world to address sinister developments with Indian authorities.

**At least a fivefold increase**

Last year, the number of verified cases was five times the number of cases in 2014, the year the Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power. But the real impact may be even greater. EFI points out that more than 160 reported cases cannot be verified according to their guidelines, but that does not mean the cases were not real. There is also good reason to suspect underreporting. Particularly in poor amd rural village areas, many victims hesitate to report cases due to fear of retribution.

In March 2026, state number 13 passed a law that criminalizes conversion. Those types of laws are used as weapons to accuse Christians, without evidence, of illegally converting someone.

**Asking for help**

Stefanus Alliance International's friends in India are challenging Indian authorities to put an end to Hindu nationalist mobs and paramilitary groups. They are asking the outside world to address the country's sinister human rights development in conversations with Indian authorities. They ask Christian friends for support and prayer.

"The risen Lord is not a distant victor who has left suffering behind, but the scarred one who walks into locked rooms, into displacement, into the places where hope has run out, and says 'peace be with you'.

He does not say, 'it was not that bad'. He does not say 'it is over now'. He says 'peace'. From the other side of the marks. From the other side of the worst Friday imaginable. With the full authority of someone who has been there and come through"

*Vijayesh Lal, Easter reflection 2026*





# Victims of Terror and Trauma



*Human Friends Organization was quick to respond to victims after the terrorist attack in Jaranwala in August 2023. Victims are now receiving continued follow-up care. Photo: HFO*

For nearly four years, a woman with mental illness was in prison, innocent of the blasphemy charges against her. In October, she was acquitted and set free.

In January 2022, the woman was accused of sending blasphemous messages through WhatsApp and Facebook. In October 2025, the woman – then 29 years old – was acquitted by the Lahore High Court, citing a lack of evidence and serious flaws in the investigation.

**Legal aid secured**

Human Friends Organization (HFO), Stefanus Alliance International's partner in Pakistan, secured an attorney and supported the woman's family while she was in prison. HFO has retained lawyers in four other blasphemy cases that are still before the courts.

In August 2023, Jaranwala in Faisalabad experienced a large-scale terrorist attack. An enraged mob set fire to the Christian neighborhood after false blasphemy accusations. More than 20 churches and 90 homes were destroyed. People who escaped in time are trying to rebuild their lives.

HFO brought in a mental health professional and offered survivors psycho-social trauma care. More than 400 survivors participated in the program, and just over 60 percent of the participants were women. They addressed trauma affecting individuals, families, and the broader community.

**Launched booklet**

In November 2025, the Urdu edition of the Stefanus Alliance International educational booklet "Freedom of Religion or Belief for All — with Women in Focus" was launched in Lahore, Pakistan. The launch brought together religious leaders*f*, Muslim scholars, teachers, journalists, attorneys, and human rights defenders. The booklet was very well received. Both the booklet and the launch event highlight the need to elevate women's rights, and their unique experiences, within the framework of freedom of religion or belief.

Last year, HFO received NOK 400,000 in additional funds for emergency relief for flood victims from Stefanus Alliance International's Sarepta Fund, after they discovered areas where aid was distributed according to religious status and not equally.



*Tim A. Peters, in the demilitarized zone separating South Korea and North Korea. Photo: Thea Haavet*

# Hacking and Arrests

Last year, the mission to help North Korean refugees suffered two dramatic setbacks.

For nearly 25 years, we have supported Helping Hands Korea (HHK), who help North Korean refugees reach safety, through an underground network of churches and helpers in China. Most of the survivors go to South Korea.

In 2024, HHK reported that China's crackdown on unregistered churches also impacted Korean-Chinese churches near the North Korean border. This made it even more dangerous and difficult for Korean-Chinese Christians to assist refugees from the Kim-dictatorship. Director of HHK, Tim A. Peters, writes that 2024 was a warning of what could await: in 2025, the whole ministry was deeply tested.

Early in the year, a South Korean intelligence agency warned that HHK's communication surrounding rescue missions for North Korean refugees in China had been hacked by the North Korean government. With the help of experts, all communication equipment was cleansed and replaced to protect against new digital break-ins.

**Key figure arrested**

In the summer of 2025, the situation took a turn for the worse. One of the key collaborators on the "underground railroad", as the operation is called, was arrested by Chinese police. For nearly two decades, this person has been a critical link in the long line of helpers who guide groups of defectors through China.

**Stefanus Alliance and North Korea**

- Helping Hands Korea helps refugees out of China, helps victims of human trafficking and sends seed packets into North Korea.
- A church in Seoul smuggled money for food to Christians inside North Korea.
- Korea Future Initiative document human rights violations in North Korea and advocate for effective international sanctions against the dictatorship.

This means HHK has had to transition to an alternate network. "In his mercy, God reminded us of a faithful, Christian activist we had collaborated with in previous years", Peters writes. This person, it turned out, is still active and willing to collaborate.

**Rescued a mother and son**

The partnership with Peters and HHK remains in 2026, although the rescue mission is on a smaller scale than it has been historically. In September 2025, a 38-year-old mother and her 11-year-old son were helped out of China. In January, they reached South Korea, safe and sound. Stefanus Alliance International funded the rescue operation.

> In 2025, the work of Helping Hands Korea was truly tested.

With funding from Stefanus Alliance International, HHK has also donated clothing, food and school materials to 25 children of North Korean women who were victims of human trafficking in China.

From 2026, Stefanus Alliance International also supports HHK's project of sending packages of vegetable seeds to North Korea. The small bags are packaged in Seoul, South Korea. Korean-Chinese Christians then deliver them to relatives in North Korea, so they have an opportunity to grow food.

"The Lord has many unique strategies to keep the seed ministry alive. It meets desperate needs," Peters writes.





# Positive Development in Sri Lanka

In the four years from 2022 up to and including 2025, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance in Sri Lanka (NCEASL) documented 389 violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. There may have been more.

In 2022, government officials were involved in two-thirds (67%) of the cases involving violations of freedom of religion or belief. By 2025, that number had fallen to 38.5%.

The exact reason for the decline is unknown. However, "increased international, national, and regional advocacy by organizations like ours and our partners may have played a role," our partner organization humbly says.

In 2024 and 2025, the Christian umbrella organization NCEASL provided training on freedom of religion or belief for 107 government officials in two vulnerable districts in northern Sri Lanka. Nine out of ten participants later said they had gained a better understanding of freedom of religion or belief and a more positive attitude toward people from other religious backgrounds.

From 2022 to 2025, NCEASL facilitated 10 direct communications between attorneys and government officials regarding serious violations of freedom of religion or belief. Most of the cases were resolved.

In the fall of 2025, NCEASL received NOK 200,000 in emergency relief from Stefanus Alliance International's Sarepta Fund for people whose homes and livelihoods had been destroyed by floods and landslides.



*Nashima and her husband lost everything they owned in a landslide in fall of 2025. Their church has been a vital support. Photo: Ranveig Nordgaard.*



*This Easter, the church in Antalya gathered 600 visitors for their grand annual Easter performance, in addition to regular attendees.*

# Easter to the People

Antalya Evangelical Church continues to grow. In 2025, 17 new believers were baptized – after 16 baptismal preparation classes.

On May 17 this year, 15 new members were baptized, and there will likely be another baptism service before the year is over.

Before this year's baptism services began, nearly 70 have been baptized in the last five years. Around 25 of those no longer attend the church. Some are students or professionals who have moved, bringing their faith to other churches. Around 20 have likely stopped attending altogether.

"Some may have disappeared because of family and community pressure. It may be worthwhile to conduct a study of how many new believers remain and why some disappear," says pastor Ramazan Arkan.

> The approximately 650 attendees were genuinely open to hearing about the hope we have in Christ.
>
> *Ramazan Arkan, pastor*

**New fellowship**

The church, which has three locations in different parts of Antalya, is now establishing a fellowship in Isparta, two and a half hours to the north. In Acts chapter 13, the city is described as Antioch in Pisidia. Isparta has no church or known organized Christian presence.

Representatives from the church in Antalya travel a couple of times each month, to direct Bible groups for the 15 people who are interested.

During the Christmas season 2025, the church arranged Christmas parties for women, youth, and students. Approximately 250 people heard the gospel and accepted Bibles.

**Many reached at Christmas and Easter**

On December 28 the church arranged a major Christmas celebration at an event space in Antalya.

"We invited people from all over the city. A choir, theater performance, dancing, live music and reading of the Christmas story, we shared a clear gospel-centered message. The approximately 650 attendees, in addition to our own people, were genuinely open to hearing about the hope we have in Christ. We also had an opportunity to give God's word as a gift," Ramazan reports.

During Easter 2026 a similar event gathered nearly 600, in addition to regular attendees. Easter 2025, the church gathered 800. New Testaments are given out freely to anyone who wants one.





# Long-Term Workers Deported from Türkiye

Last year was a sad record year for foreign Christians who for years have been involved and had leadership responsibility in Protestant churches.

46 people were denied residence permits, or were denied re-entry after a trip to another country.

Since 2019, 178 foreign Christians have been denied access. More than a quarter of those cases happened in 2025, according to the Association of Protestant Churches (TEK)'s annual report, which is produced with funds from Stefanus Alliance.

The Protestant community has lost significant resources and it is a struggle to train new leaders to take on a high level of responsibility.

For several years, foreign church members have lived in fear of being deported at any time.

Pastor Ramazan Arkan, director of TEK, says deportations seem to have ceased for now. In 2026 there have only been a handful of cases.

On February 23 this year, the European Parliament decided to warn Türkiye. They confirmed that deportation of foreign journalists and Christians, citing national security without a fair trial, is a violation of basic human rights – both the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right to freedom of expression. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected the claims as baseless.

"With Türkiye, we never know, this could flare up again," says pastor and TEK-director Ramazan Arkan.



*Ramazan Arkan is the primary pastor of Antalya Evangelical Church and director of the Association of Protestant Churches in Türkiye. Photo: Antalya Evangelical Church*



*Board chair of Stefanus Alliance International, Anne Mari Schiager Topland (right) listens to a painful story from a Jesus-following woman with a Muslim background in Uzbekistan. Photo: Eva Frydenborg*

# Supporting Women At Risk

Jesus-following women who are kicked out of their homes and societies receive support, with the help of Stefanus Alliance International partners in Central Asia.

A woman, M., came to faith in Christ together with her husband in Uzbekistan around 15 years ago. But, because of negative reactions from local Muslims, he broke contact with Christians and forbade his wife from meeting other women in the church.

> Here, they could speak with one another, laugh, experience fellowship and time with God.
>
> *Central Asia partner*

As a child, M. was exposed to sexual abuse by a family member. When even her own husband began physically abusing her, she felt very defeated. Eventually, M. began seeking out other Christian women again. Now, she can't go without a single meeting.

**Shared pain**

"She has been able to share pain that she has never been able to talk to anyone else about before," writes our partner, who in 2025 helped around 40 women. Women receive psychological help to resist stress and persecution, and help with protecting their children. Our partner visits the women as frequently as possible. Some of them do cave to pressure to leave their faith. Many continue on in their faith, with support.

**Motivating**

A different partner in Uzbekistan hosts a women's conference each year, and in 2025 they had 107 attendees. Many of them are pastors' wives who bear a heavy responsibility for the women in the church, in addition to responsibility for caring for their home and children.

Women received teaching and a chance to rest. For many, it's a completely new experience to not be responsible and get to speak with others in the same situation. Speakers emphasized encouraging and motivating the women and highlighting the value of the work they do.

**Laughing together**

In Tajikistan, Stefanus Alliance International supports a similar conference, with 56 participants last year. "Women seldom have the opportunity to travel and leave the home. Both their husbands and mothers-in-law can demand they stay home. At the conference, they got to be with others in a new atmosphere. Here, they could speak with one another, laugh, experience fellowship and time with God," our partner writes.





# Opposition in Court

In Kyrgyzstan, the courtroom has become a more important place for the battle for freedom of religion or belief.



*Pastor Pavel Schreider and his wife Nelya. Photo: Vera Schreider*

The Research Center for Religious Studies (RCRS), our partner in Kyrgyzstan, has followed criminal cases and civil cases regarding property disputes, registration, and accusations of extremism. Some cases were won, and some were lost.

In fall of 2025, the court approved the state confiscation of a church building owned by an evangelical church. Such cases have become increasingly common. The judgment was appealed, and in December the city court overturned the judgment and asked for a new hearing. It was an important decision. It showed there is space for legal resistance, even when religious minorities face state overreach.

But not all cases ended in victory.

Pastor Pavel Schreider (66) was convicted of "inciting religious hatred" and "propaganda of superiority". The accusation was based on statements from state experts on religion and language. RCRS obtained an alternative expert assessment that found no signs of hatred or extremism. Nevertheless, the court chose to convict the pastor. The case will be taken further internationally.

**Labeled as extremist**

The most serious case in 2025 was regarding the Adventist church, which was labeled an "extremist organization", a verdict confirmed by the Supreme Court. Consequences were dramatic: a total ban on all activities, ban on religious symbols and texts, and members face serious risk.

The same expert witnesses used against pastor Schreider were used here. For the first time, a Kyrgyz verdict banning an established religious community for "extremism" is being tried internationally, as a complaint has been filed with the UN Human Rights Committee.

> The fight for freedom of religion is not only about faith. It is about the rule of law.

**Silent victory**

The Stefanus Alliance partner also gave legal aid to foreign missionaries, who did receive new registration.

"This is a quiet victory that is decisive for religious freedom in practice. 2025 showed that the legal system can still function. The fight for freedom of religion or belief is not only about faith. It is about the rule of law, power, and who has access to society," our partners at RCRS write.

**Read more about Central Asia**

Forum 18 News Service reports on violations of the freedom of religion or belief in Central Asia, among other places. Scan the QR code to read news and editorials at www.forum18.org.

Forum 18 News Service is funded in part by Stefanus Alliance.

## Extensive Counsel

Last year, Stefanus Alliance International's partner in Kazakhstan gave 745 hours of legal counsel to 134 people from small religious minorities. Topics included registration of religious communities, registration and visas for missionaries, use of hijab in school, and help for an organization that had been banned. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law is the only human rights organization that works to promote the freedom of religion and belief in the country.



*Dien, in a Hmong suit, offers communion to male pastors during a conference. Photo: Johannes Morken*

# Her dream: To be a Pastor

Dien (33) has big dreams of serving as a woman in the Vietnamese church: she wants to be a pastor.

Dao Thi Dien was five years old when her parents sold everything they owned in the northwestern Vietnamese mountains. This was in 1997, and they fled because of religious persecution. The bus ride brought them 2000 km to the Central Highlands of Vietnam, to build a new life.

**Saw the Jesus film**

Dien accepted Jesus when she was ten years old, after watching the movie "The Life of Jesus". After reading John 3:16, she decided to serve God. Dien was baptized at 13 years old. She now lives with her husband and three children in a village in Dak Nong province.

Dien directs women's gatherings at the church, with worship and teaching. On the international women's day, March 8, she gathers women to a cooking competition and drama, Bible quiz, and picnic. The church has more than 800 members and is currently in the end stage of building a new church that can fit everyone who wants to come.

**Male dominated**

Churches among the Hmong people are dominated by men. But the faith community Vietnam Good News Mission, a partner of Stefanus Alliance International, has so far ordained five female pastors and 20 preachers.

"I would like to be a pastor. The church needs women as pastors. But to take higher education I first have to learn Vietnamese," Dien explains.

She adds, "today, Hmong women often labor in the fields to support the men while they attend Bible school. I look forward to my husband one day being able to support me, so that I can get an education. But we have three small children to care for and don't have money for me to travel to Ho Chi Minh City for studies. But one day, I hope this can happen."

> I look forward to my husband one day being able to support me, so that I can get an education.
>
> *Dien*



*Dien and her husband Hai on a beach by the South China Sea.*

## More than 260 new believers

With funding from Stefanus Alliance, Hmong Ministry works among the Hmong people in Vietnam and Laos, among other places. In 2025, 262 new people came to faith. 108 were baptized. Three new churches were planted. Pastor Benjamin and his partners had 28 gatherings for faith formation/Bible courses with 467 participants in total. Hmong Ministry also operates Hmong Bible School in Udon Thany in Thailand. In 2025 there were 55 students in total, of whom 21 were new.





# Preached to 40,000

A total of 129 new believers were baptized in 2025, despite growing extremism.

Stefanus Alliance International supports a network of house fellowships for believers with Muslim backgrounds in Bangladesh. They confess faith in Jesus Christ – Isa Masih – as their Lord and savior, but socioculturally retain an identity as Muslims.

Evangelists in the network shared the gospel with 40,000 non-believers and gave copies of the Gospels to 20,000. Many heard the name of Isa Masih for the first time.

**Extremism**

After major protests made the Prime Minister flee to India in August 2024, Bangladesh has suffered political instability, a decline in law and order, and growing Muslim extremism. Activists are posting videos on YouTube and accusing those who believe in Isa Masih of not being true Muslims, which can sometimes be a source of massive pressure.

"The country is moving into a deep darkness. Muslim fundamentalists are becoming more powerful, more intolerant, and more violent. Sharing the Bible's message with them now means placing yourself at an extreme danger. But even under these circumstances, in 2025 three mullahs accepted Isa Masih as their savior," writes Mehedi, who directs the network.

**Deceit**

In 2025, baptizing believers with Muslim backgrounds became riskier. It was not made any easier after a Christian man from the Jessore district brought nearly 100 young Muslim men to a vacation destination, telling them they were going to a picnic.

"In a devious manner, he got them baptized," writes Mehedi through a safe channel. A TV broadcaster did a larger exposé on the situation, ensuring that authorities and Muslim leaders were well acquainted with the incident.

"There was a major reaction. This deceit has endangered us, and created obstacles for our ministry," Mehedi says.

**Baptism seminar**

But nonetheless: The network hosted a baptism seminar in a safe location near the capital city of Dhaka. 52 people were baptized. 77 others were baptized in their house churches. Altogether, 129 new believers were baptized – up from 96 in 2024.

In 2025 new editions of the gospels of Luke and John were also published, in a language that is more easily accessible for Muslims. The network hosted seminars for 32 women and 34 young people, where new leadership talents were identified.



*Our partner is frequently baptizing new believers. Photo: Stefanus Alliance International's partner in Bangladesh*



*Prayer and worship at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Beirut. Photo: ABTS.*

# A Psalm for War

Arab Baptist Theological Seminary educates leaders for the Church in the Middle East and North Africa. From 2026 onward, Stefanus Alliance supports them with core funding for the entire operation, not only individual projects.

In the middle of the school year, Lebanon was once again pulled into "a war the country did not choose for itself", as principal Wassim Nasrallah described it. One million people were displaced.

Nasrallah writes that "refuge has become one of the most precious words a human can hear, especially here in Lebanon. That's why Psalm 46 speaks so clearly to times like these. It does not offer shallow comfort."

**Psalm for a crisis**

He continues: "Psalm 46 is striking because it is so realistic. It does not deny need and does not minimize suffering. It describes the earth giving way, mountains roaring and foaming. This is not just a psalm for peaceful afternoons. It is a psalm for crisis, fear, and war.

And yet, it says: 'Therefore we will not fear'. Not because trials end, but because God is near. Faith does not begin with denying the pain. It begins with arranging reality anew."

Nasrallah writes that the crisis shall not have the final word.

"God's people can suffer, but never be abandoned. This gives us strength to serve others in the hour of need. In times of change the gospel's instinct is not to withdraw from pain, but to meet it. At Arab Baptist Theological Seminary here in Beirut, this has driven us to open our doors for those who have nowhere else to go."

**Psalm for hope**

He writes that for Christians, hope is made clearer in Jesus Christ.

"In Him, God's refuge becomes personal and evident. (...) But Psalm 46 does more than comfort. It also gives us a mission. Those who find refuge in God, will themselves become a people who give others refuge. Prayer is not passive withdrawal, but an action in holy resistance. To pray is to stand in the gap and deny complacency. It is to declare that war will not have the final word, that fear will not silence hope, and that Christ remains Lord, even in the midst of worry and chaos."

## Prayer During War

In the countries surrounding the Persian Gulf, Stefanus Alliance supports a partner who follows up believers from Muslim backgrounds, several of whom currently reside in Europe. For security reasons, we will not give further details about who our partner is or how their ministry occurs.

In 2026, everything in the region is impacted by the war between Israel, Iran, and the United States, and many activities are paused. Our partner describes receiving many questions from believers in countries where religion, politics, and society overlap nearly entirely.

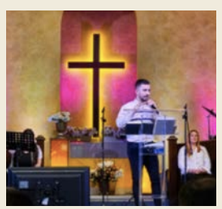
He states that "Israel is looking at the situation like a holy war from the book of Esther. And Shia Muslims also view it as a holy war, because it carries a message of the coming of Mahdi." To a believer from Saudi Arabia, our partner explained:

"We pray that the war must stop, because it leads to destruction on every level. We do not accept ideas from politicians who occasionally use biblical texts to justify their own agendas, by taking verses out of their context or misusing then from the text's original meaning. Some encouraging news is that there are more prayer meetings in churches and homes in times of fear and concern, in a situation where no one knows how it will all end."

## Teacher and Servant

Despite the war, the school year has gone as planned, ABTS reports. Lecturers are fully engaged in teaching and counseling, while at the same time aware of the emotional toll on those students who are currently displaced.

Abdulrahman is a student seeking a bachelor's degree in theology, and currently lives at the school's guest house due to the war. He says he is learning how to care for students from a wide variety of backgrounds.



*Abdulrahman has sought refuge at the guest house due to war displacement. Photo: ABTS*

## Middle East and North Africa

Based in Lebanon, two of Stefanus Alliance International's partners actively work to reach the Middle East and North Africa. On these pages you read about Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, who equip church leaders. On the next pages you can read about the Adyan Foundation, who work to promote the freedom of religion or belief for all.

In one country in North Africa where Christians with Muslim backgrounds can only meet in house churches or underground churches, Stefanus Alliance International supports an organization that strengthens and educates Christian women. For security reasons, we will not share information about the name of this partner or the country they operate in.

The organization offers retreats and training, workshops on trauma recovery, leadership- and evangelism training, and vocational training so women who have lost their families can earn a living.



*A group of Muslims and Christians from an Adyan Foundation course visit the Greek Orthodox St. Elias Cathedral in Beirut, Lebanon. Photo: Adyan Foundation*

# New Climate for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Several hundred young people in the Middle East and North Africa have actively taken on the fight for freedom of religion or belief. In several countries, participants report a cultural shift in how diversity is perceived.

In a region characterized by authoritarian regimes, suppression of religious minorities, politicized religion, and extremism, the feedback from participants who took a class on the freedom of religion or belief is good. "Publicly discussing religious freedom – which was formerly impossible – is now possible. The Adyan project has placed faith in a non-political frame and created trust and safety," says a participant from Yemen.

**"One encounter at a time"**

" A cultural shift could mean a turning point in the region, through one human encounter at a time," concludes Adyan Foundation in a report from a four-year project supported by Stefanus Alliance.

Participants from several nations say safe spaces have been created. Several participants say that in their local communities, it has become easier for them to bring up religion in conversation with neighbors and friends.

Several hundred young people have already brought the lessons home to where they live. Two out of three participants say that since attending the training, they have increased their personal effort to promote the freedom of religion or belief.

In countries like Tunisia, Iraq, and Lebanon, participants have among other things arranged dialogue meetings and youth campaigns for peaceful coexistence. In youth-led workshops they reached more than 250 peers as well as established networks for religious diversity. At the same time, they collaborate with religious leaders and journalists to reach even further.

> A cultural shift could mean a turning point in the region
>
> *Adyan Foundation*

**"Moral value"**

"Freedom of religion and belief has entered the public vocabulary as a civic and moral value, rather than a politically charged concept. Today journalists are calling us before they write about religion – to check the facts. That's a cultural shift," says an Egyptian participant.

Adyan has created a digital platform with resources on the freedom of religion and belief. At the end of 2025, it had gained 19 000 unique users and become an important tool in countries stretching from Lebanon to Morocco.

**Adyan Foundation**
- Based in Beirut, Lebanon
- Founded by a Muslim and a Christian, in order to promote better relationships between Muslims and Christians
- Offers training on freedom of religion or belief in the Middle East and North Africa
- Stefanus Alliance International's largest single partner, thanks to funding from the Norwegian government





## Strengthening Parliamentarians

A global network of parliamentarians for the freedom of religion or belief (IPPFoRB) has returned to Stefanus Alliance International – where it began in 2014 – after ten years housed in the Norwegian Helsinki Committee.

In 2025, regional academies were hosted in Africa and South-East Asia. In April 2026, an academy was also hosted in South America.

Education for parliamentarians is a key factor: as connecting agents between local communities and decision-makers, they can lift voices that often are not heard, influence legislation, examine policies, and contribute to lasting mechanisms that will protect vulnerable groups.

During the academies, declarations were signed that highlight the challenges for freedom of religion or belief in each region. The signatories created plans they are obligated to follow up after the academies ended.




*Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, leads a session on FoRB and women's rights at the Accra academy in Ghana for African parliamentarians. Photo: IPPFoRB*

# Women, Power, and Resistance



*Dr. Salli Effungani from Procmura describes how women are being mobilized.*
*Photo: Procmura*

Last year, a total of 526 Christian women from three African countries received training that gave them the knowledge and power to fight for religious freedom and women's rights.

More than half (270) came from two regions of Nigeria that are particularly vulnerable to terrorism – Plateau and Kaduna. The others came from Kenya and Cameroon.

**Hundreds participated**
In the two Nigerian states mentioned, nearly 300 additional women, men, youth, and religious leaders have engaged the topic through conversation groups in local communities and churches.

All these efforts have strengthened awareness of women's rights. The programs were conducted by Procmura, Stefanus Alliance International's partner.

84 women have been trained in the topic of human rights and the specific freedom of religion or belief, in order to share knowledge with others in their home communities. They have hosted forums where women have gained help to find language to share their experiences of how religious freedom is violated for women in completely different ways than for men: such as female genital mutilation, social control, gender norms in patriarchal societies, and the individual's right to free exercise of religion. Together, the women have gained a community to highlight this topic for religious and local leaders.

> The projects are well received, particularly in regions with a high level of conflict.
>
> *Dr. Salli Effungani*

**Well received**
Dr. Salli Effungani at Procmura says the projects are well received, particularly in regions with a high level of conflict – with Nigeria and Cameroon both marked by tension, violence, and terrorism.

The project has had at least 1600 direct participants in 2025. Additionally, Procmura's radio programming has reached 2,000-3,000 listeners in each of the three countries participating. Listeners can call in to ask questions about freedom of religion or belief to activists and religious leaders.

Procmura also organizes a network of 140 individuals who are trained in or actively work in the field of freedom of religion. 80 percent of them actively promote the freedom of religion or belief through churches, mosques, and local communities.

**Young dialogue**
Kenyan network members established a forum for youth in various neighborhoods around Nairobi in 2025. They work against stereotypes and distrust – and for inclusion and a more just distribution of resources.

In one place, someone asked why Muslims had to go so far to attend their Muslim schools. Dialogue and shared activities began building relationships, and several Muslims started attending the Christian school nearby. A focus on freedom of religion or belief can contribute to inclusion and more equitable communities.

**Procmura**
- A Christian organization
- Based in Nairobi, Kenya
- Goal: peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims
- Work in approximately 20 countries in Africa





# Changing Atmosphere

A Shia Muslim woman was inspired. Lawyers who disliked the freedom of religion changed their minds.

Asma is a Shia Muslim from the Kurdish region of Iraq. She has participated in activities for freedom of religion or belief, hosted by the Kurdistan Center for International Law (KCIL) in Sulaymaniyah, near the border with Iran.

"I have been inspired, and as always will bring knowledge home to host similar activities. I will try to increase awareness of and attention to the freedom of religion and belief, using arts and creativity," she says.

**An effort against distrust**
Spring of 2025, during iftar – the evening meal during the fasting month of Ramadan – KCIL gathered 12 representatives from various regions: five women and seven men. There were Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, Baha'is, and representatives from the Kakai community. A mullah, young activists, musicians, and a journalist created room for dialogue.

On May 10 2025, KCIL met the the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs in the Kurdish region. They addressed honestly how hateful rhetoric in mosques during Friday prayers makes disunity and distrust grow, with destructive consequences. Hate speech can constitute crimes against humanity.

**Lawyers turned positive**
KCIL also educates lawyers on the subject of freedom of religion and belief. Altogether 35 lawyers participated in two separate two-day gatherings in April and June 2025.

During one gathering in particular, the subject of freedom of religion and belief was met with hostility. Some lawyers claimed religious freedom is an affront to Islam.

The teacher emphasized that freedom of religion is for everyone, and not a threat. By day two, the atmosphere had turned – and the lawyers were together making action plans to actively promote the universal right to freedom of religion and belief.



*Ja Seng Ing from Myanmar received the Stefanus Prize 2026. Here she is, surrounded by the award committee: From the left: Dag Inge Ulstein, leader of Norway's Christian Democratic Party; Ingeborg Midttømme, Church of Norway bishop; and Greg Reichberg, professor at Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Photo: Johannes Morken*

# Honored for Fighting the Junta

Doctor and activist Ja Seng Ing from Myanmar is awarded the Stefanus Prize for 2026. Bishop Ingeborg Midttømme presented the award – consisting of a diploma and 10,000 Euro – at Oslo's Hotel Continental on May 28.

"She received the award for her courageous and unshakeable passion for freedom of religion and belief for everyone, for her tireless work to strengthen and equip others, for her courage to document atrocities, and for her ability to tie the suffering of local communities on the ground to the attention of the international community," Midttømme said. She added:

"Throughout her work, many have found protection, strength, and hope. And through this award, we also wish to send a message: to all those in Myanmar who continue the battle for justice and freedom – you are not forgotten."

Ja Seng Ing is a Christian and belongs to the Kachin people. After the military coup in 2021, Seng chose to live in hiding from the junta for a year and a half while continuing work inside Myanmar. There, she documented serious violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, and provided trainings on the topic for religious leaders, female parliamentarians, and activists participating in civil disobedience. When the risk grew too large, she left the country.

"The Stefanus Prize enables me to step out of the shadow. I want to use my voice even more clearly for Myanmar's Christians, Muslims, and people with no faith," Seng says.

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stefanus alliance international
until it is safe to believe

As a witness of Christ, the Stefanus Alliance strengthens the persecuted Church and promotes the right to freedom of religion or belief – for everyone.

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