

Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Held online, via Zoom

28th October 2021

Present

John Mason MSP
Murdo Fraser MSP
Jeremy Balfour MSP
Stephen Kerr MSP
Alan Meldrum
Craig Horne
Maureen Sier
Jamie Spurway
Ali-Abbas Hussnain
Oliver Lane
Patricia Findlay
Philip Mendelson
James Fraser
Michael Balcomb
Brian Miller
Lorraine McMahon
Steve Begarnie
Malcolm MacLeod
Anne Dunn

Apologies

Katy Clark MSP
Anthony Horan
The Rt Hon Lord Wallace of Tankerness
Rose Drew
Ravinder Kaur Nijjar
Hassan Rabbani
Nigel Kenny

Quorate

As John Mason MSP, Murdo Fraser MSP, Stephen Kerr MSP and Jeremy Balfour MSP were all present, the meeting was quorate.

Annual General Meeting

John Mason welcomed the attendants to the first meeting of this session. He described the purpose of the group and opened the election of the convenor, co-convenor and secretariat. Stephen Kerr and Jeremy Balfour proposed John Mason as the convenor. John Mason accepted the proposal and then nominated Murdo Fraser as co-convenor and Stephen Kerr and Jeremy

Balfour seconded this. Murdo Fraser accepted the role of co-convenor. John Mason also proposed Interfaith Scotland as the secretariat and this was seconded by Jeremy Balfour. Interfaith Scotland accepted the role of secretariat.

John Mason then introduced the evening's speaker, Alan Meldrum from Open Doors.

Presentation from Alan Meldrum

The research that we do at Open Doors is an academic study. It is ratified based on information from police and government forces, as well as our own insights. Our work is entirely Christian in focus, but we recognise that other faiths are under persecution as well. The presentation focuses on the world watch list which is the 50 countries with the worst levels of religious persecution.

Number 10 on the list is India and this has been one of the biggest changes in recent years. Muslims and Christians are coming under extreme persecution there. Open Doors is opening up a whole department to work with the government on issues relating to religious persecution in the country.

Worldwide 340 million Christians experience systematic persecution. In sub-Saharan Africa it is 1 in 5 Christians. There is evidence of religious minorities experiencing discrimination in their access to healthcare relating to Covid. In China we are seeing bulldozing of churches. The law now states that children cannot go to Sunday school. This is to stop the faith of your own children being fostered. In Latin America 1 in 12 Christians face persecution. But the issue in that region is that it is very violent so we see high death levels in that area.

13 Christians are killed every day for their faith. Every day 12 churches or Christian's buildings are attacked or levelled. Every day 12 Christians are unjustly arrested, detained or imprisoned. Every day 5 Christians are abducted for faith-based reasons. This is increasing and is in line with other religions experiencing similar treatment.

Drivers include poverty, nationalism and ethno-religious hostility. Climate is a factor too. Christians and Muslims have been denied Covid treatment in India. People have been losing their jobs as well. There seems to be an attempt to remove Islam and Christianity from India.

We are seeing Covid being used as an excuse to discriminate against minority faiths. India, China and Middle East and Africa are experiencing unprecedented levels of persecution against religious minorities.

Disinformation and speech that incites violence is very much on the rise in India. But that isn't isolated. Where nationalism is going we find that discrimination follows right after it. We also see that women in minorities are the most persecuted. Some are abducted to be married outside their faith. It is often violent. Many harms are hidden behind closed doors.

But there are reasons for hope. We have been able to provide hope and counselling to ease people's recovery. The Christian brothers and sisters around the world have been able to provide very meaningful help and support.

Actually, the Christian faith is growing in areas where there is a great deal of persecution. In China there could be as many as 350 million Christians which is a source of worry for the authorities. I am a pastor in Royston and I meet many asylum seekers who have had to flee their countries because of religious persecution.

Questions

Q. You mentioned poverty as a factor. The West is seen to be Christian and so are Christian people perceived to be Western and therefore wealthy?

A. Yes in Egypt Christianity was introduced centuries ago but people are perceived to be Western if they are Christian.

Q. The highlight of India is interesting. There is beginning to be some fallout here in Scotland. There is tension in relation to particular groups. People can be caught out by unknowingly inviting speakers from groups that have extremist links. Could we have a kind of watch list of those who are linked to extremism to enable us to do due diligence on those we engage with?

A. I think what we are seeing is that there are large Asian communities here, great communities. And they represent every group. But often they came here because they were poor and were highly persecuted. The danger is that some of the mainstream groups are declared as sects and are therefore not welcome. So we need to avoid the big groups not allowing the little groups from coming in. China is an interesting example. Chinese students in Glasgow have brought a very stilted view of religion. So we need to be monitoring that, so we don't import hate or prejudice from these New Scots.

Maureen Sier- Some of the right-wing Indian groups are becoming very Islamophobic. But we must be conscious to not demonise the whole Hindu community. People can love their country but not approve of the politics necessarily.

Future Meetings

A suggestion for the topic of future meeting is Pakistan. But there is little point in doing that unless there is hard action that would follow.

Afghanistan was also suggested as a future topic. The persecution of people of Hazara ethnicity who are usually Shia Muslim. The Ahlul Bayt Society may be able to find a suitable speaker. Malcolm MacLeod also indicated he may know a possible speaker on Afghanistan.

John Mason proposed four meetings per year of the CPG. He also suggested that subject to Parliament guidance, two could be online and two in person.

Action Points

John Mason commented that the group has written letters in the past and John is open to doing that again. Letters must be circulated around the group for approval.