

International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church 2026

STRENGTHEN THE CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST

**SUGGESTED
SERMON OUTLINE**



Open Doors

Guide for Service Leader

The following is a suggested sermon outline for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, 2026. Please feel free to adapt this as you wish.

The outline is in the form of a scripted sermon which has been written to be read aloud and can be adapted to suit the style of the service leader and their congregation.

It includes one video with audio. If it is not possible to show this video, then their key contents can be read by three readers representing the narrator and the two subjects of the video, Hanane and Elias.

Do please watch the videos first to make sure they are suitable for your congregation.

The service incorporates **call and response prayers**. We recommend you use speakers to represent the different voices as they make their observations and follow these with their prayers.

Six voices are required: Narrator, Hanan (female), Elias (male), Father Bashar Laham, Sahar (female), Mousa (male).

The service, as scripted, should take between **20 and 30 minutes**. The video played in two parts should take **approximately 4 minutes respectively**.

Thank you.

Service Outline

INTRODUCTION

Today we commemorate the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church — IDOP. Our focus is on the Middle East, a troubled region, where millions of Christians have left or are leaving to escape conflict.

We are invited by our persecuted brothers and sisters who remain to feel what they feel, to stand with them in their suffering. So our time ahead will not be comfortable.

Our Christian family invites us to pray for them, to strengthen what remains.

Let's give ourselves to this act of identification in **prayer**:

Emmanuel, God with us. You saw us in our need, you loved, and you came to bear our burdens. Help us to look upon the needs of our brothers and sisters and not turn away. Help us to love, so we can bear their burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ.

READING

Service Leader:

Revelation 3:2 urges us: *'Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die.'*

This call to strengthen what remains could be taken as an urgent, personal call to revival.

Or it could be seen as a call to help those in the body of Christ who are persecuted and hard pressed by those determined to eradicate their presence.

And it is in that sense that we commit ourselves to watch and pray with our brothers and sisters in their Gethsemane.

To watch, to pray, to care and to *feel* what they feel.

And so, to 'bear one another's burdens, and in this way fulfil the law of Christ.' (Galatians 6:2)

VIDEO OR STORY

[Video option: "Life after a church bombing | Elias, Syria" Part 1 (play the video until 4 minutes 38 seconds)]

Service Leader:

We begin with the first part of the video, of Christians in Syria who survived an attack on their church by a suicide bomber. The content has been edited to make it suitable for showing more widely, but some parts are still distressing:

[Or Narrated option (requiring three readers, of which at least one of whom should be female)]

Narrator:

This is the story of Elias (eh-LEE-yas) and his wife Hanan (hah-NAHN) from Syria. Last June, they were at a service at Mar Elias Church in Damascus with their children.

Hanan:

I looked around and saw my husband sitting with our five children. Moments later, my son Ibrahim got up, holding a candle walking towards the altar of the church.

I was so happy to see him like that. But he had barely taken his place when the sound of gunfire erupted.

Narrator:

A terrorist had burst in through the doors. He was armed with a rifle and explosives.

Elias:

The door was forced open and we were attacked by a gunman who fired live ammunition at the people, shooting right and left, left and right.

Hanan:

My brother-in-law, Geryos (JEH-ree-os) started shouting at us to take cover. I crouched down between two pews.

Elias:

My brother Boutros (BOO-tros) lunged at the attacker, trying to pull him to the ground. My other brother Geryos (JEH-ree-os) jumped on him from above and wrestled him down. Other people helped pin the attacker down.

As the terrorist lost control of the situation he detonated his explosives.

You cannot imagine the scene. The church turned red.

The femoral artery in my thigh was hit. There was no-one to help. I remained lying inside the church for more than ten minutes, my artery severed and bleeding out, with no one even to tie a shirt as a tourniquet or begin first aid.

But I took no notice of my own condition, because my five children and my wife were there.

Hanan:

I started calling out for my children. I found three, and I was praying, 'O Lord, let me find just one more'. I wanted to find at least one more alive.

Narrator:

Elias, Hanan and their five children survived the bombing. But Elias and daughter Sarah suffered serious injuries, Elias to his leg, Sarah to her eye.

Twenty-two Christians were killed in the bombing. The dead include four of Elias's cousins, his sister and his two brothers.

CONTEXT

Service Leader:

We will return to Elias, Hanan and their family later as they journey towards recovery.

We tell you their story because Elias has asked that we may feel what the Christians in Syria are feeling, so that we may pray for them with understanding, that they may remain steadfast in God and in His strength.

This is our act of identification. We watch and we pray.

The Middle East is alight. There are at least four major wars in the region, and at least four other conflicts. They impact Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Gaza and the Gulf.

Christians are caught up in these conflicts. Millions of believers have left the Middle East.

They're leaving Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Türkiye, Egypt, Iran and Jordan.

In Iran, 254 Christians were arrested last year. Ninety-six were sentenced to a total of 263 years in prison. Some have been made scapegoats for the war.

Syria was the first place in the world where the followers of Jesus were called Christians. From here, the first missionaries were sent to the wider Mediterranean world. Syrian believers still refer to their nation as a cradle of Christianity.

But in Syria today, the number of Christians has fallen from around 1.8 million in 2011 to just some 300,000 today.

And the decline in Iraq is even steeper.

Father Bashar Laham is from the Syrian capital Damascus. He worked to set up trauma counselling for bomb victims, such as Elias and Hanan.

He describes the consequence of such an exodus of Christians from his country:

'A church deprived of its youth is a church without a future. Conversely, youth without a church *have* no future. We are losing them.

'Today, there is a divide between the generation that wants to find success abroad and the generation that wants to work and stay in Syria.

'We are attempting to awaken this young generation to fulfil their responsibilities and ensure the permanence of the Christian church in Syria.'

This exodus of Christians from Syria and Iraq has been described as a catastrophic collapse.

In Egypt, too, which has the largest Christian population in the region, believers are leaving. The rate of decline there is slower – but is still significant.

The flight of Christians from across the Middle East is considered one of the largest religious demographic shifts in modern history.

So how do we strengthen what remains?

One way is through prayer.

Prayer is partnering with God in love.

These are the hopes and the prayers of our persecuted brothers and sisters. Some names have been changed for their protection.

SUGGESTED PRAYER

Members of the congregation:

Father Bashar Laham from Syria:

Christianity remains in this land and has reached the ends of the earth. We the ones who will stay and move forward. We will remain the beacon of light, the salt and the leaven that will ferment; we will shine a light on the darkened hearts of others.

With time, I have faith that the Lord will enter these hearts and transform them. My faith is that the church will remain.

This is my prayer: "Give us, today, our daily bread." No more, no less than we need. Father, help us to be content with our livelihood.

Help us to live in peace again, in security and fraternity – a fraternity that has been mutilated by war. May Syria remain a cradle for Christianity and for civilisation.

Response (All):

We join with our brothers and sisters in Syria in prayer: Give *us* – together – today our daily bread.

Sahar* and Maryam*, Christian women from Iran:

As I was driving, I imagined a scene – and then saw it with my own two eyes: water flowing through dry valleys just like the Lord's promise. That same hope lives in my heart: God acts and His promises are not forgotten. Iran's salvation will surely happen. Our Lord is alive.

This is our prayer: This pain is like childbirth, it comes with distress, but we pray for it to bring life and freedom soon. Our people in Iran need hope. They need to know there is a Saviour.

Response (All):

Our prayer is from Romans 15:13: 'May the God of hope fill every Christian in Iran with all joy and peace as they trust in Him, so that they may overflow with hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.'

Iranian church leader, Mousa*:

Iran is a valley of dry bones, which speak of loss, exhaustion, ruin. Our people feel cut off from their future. It is the image of a nation that has suffered too much, waited too long, and begun to wonder whether life can ever return.

We recognise ourselves in that valley. The pain of separation, the wounds of conflict, the fear caused by war, and the heaviness of exile. Dry, dry bones scattered in a valley. Yet in that valley, God asks the question: 'Can these bones live?'

This is my prayer: Father, when you speak to these bones, they come together, flesh appears and breath enters into them. What was dead begins to live. What was scattered is gathered, until all that was hopeless is filled with the breath of God. Speak, Lord.

Response (All):

Breathe your breath in these dry bones, Lord, and call them to life, that the people of Iran may know that you are the Lord.

SERVICE LEADER:

Now we turn to the prayers of Elias and Hanan from Syria.

Hanan:

Father, our prayer is to live beautiful lives, not lives of fear; that we may live in peace to see our children grow up and be happy.

Response (All):

Lord, keep your people in safety, so that they and their children may indeed live beautiful lives for you. We pray also for their deep inner healing from every trauma of the attack.

Elias:

This is my prayer: That we may resist every enemy, seen or unseen, and every thought that keeps us from glorifying God.

Response (All):

Father, chase away this cloud of darkness. Be glorified among your people in Syria.

Leader:

We will return to the prayers of Elias and Hanan shortly. But let us first hear more of their story, as they continue their long journey on the road to recovery.

Video or Story

[Video option: “Life after a church bombing | Elias, Syria” Part 2 (start from 4 minutes 38 seconds)]

[Or as before, using three speakers to voice the roles. The script for this is given below.]

Narrator:

In the wake of the terrorist attack, Open Doors has been providing trauma care for victims of the bombing through local partners.

Six months after the attack, Elias and his family return to their church for the first time since the bomber struck.

Elias:

We felt a profound mix of faith and fear; we cannot deny that, yet we know God will not forsake us.

If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord; so, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

We do not seek revenge.

Hanan:

Even now, as we enter the church, the fear remains, but even if we are afraid, we will continue to come. No matter what happens, or how much they try to frighten us, we will always return. But I want to ask people: never forget us.

Elias:

We will never be anything but Christians, and this martyrdom will be a source of strength for us, not weakness.

We ask the whole world to feel what we as Christians here feel, and to keep praying for us so that we may remain steadfast in Him and in His strength.

Narrator:

Strengthen what remains. Support their faith so that they may stand firm in the face of fear.

PRAYER

Service Leader:

These are their requests to us. So once again we join Elias and Hanan in prayer.

Elias:

We will never be anything but Christians. We ask that the whole world may feel what we feel as Christians in Syria. We ask for your prayers that we may remain steadfast in the Lord and in His strength.

This is my prayer: Lord, our faith is mixed with fear, but we know you will never forsake us. We belong to you. We will never be anything but Christians. May our martyrdom be a source of strength.

Response (All):

Father, when one part of the body suffers, all suffer. Today we stand with our brothers and sisters in Syria and across the Middle East. Today, we feel their pain.

Tomorrow, as the memory fades, help us to continue to watch and pray.

Hanan:

This is my prayer: that the body of Christ will never forget us.

Response (All):

Lord, we bind our suffering brothers and sisters to our hearts. We will remember them.

SMALL GROUP PRAYER

Service Leader:

Please join with one or two beside you to pray what is on your heart for our brothers and sisters in the Middle East.

CALL TO ACTION AND CLOSE

Service Leader:

‘Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die.’ (Revelation 3:2)

Can we do more than simply pray to strengthen our brothers and sisters?

Yes, as the Lord leads.

If you would like to offer financial support, Open Doors works through local partners in the Middle East to provide trauma counselling, training, Bible distribution, relief aid and prayer support.

To find out more, to help you to pray or to provide in practical ways, please go to the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org.hk/en-US/>

Thank you.

**name changed for security reasons*



A Iranian Christian suffers persecution for following Jesus



Open Doors' ministry began with Brother Andrew's trip to Poland 70 years ago

About Open Doors

"Strengthen what remains and is about to die."

Those were the words given to a young Dutch missionary over 70 years ago – and they've shaped a global ministry to the persecuted church ever since.

It was back in 1955 that Andrew van der Bijl went to Communist Poland with a suitcase full of gospel tracts. Behind the Iron Curtain, he found isolated Christians who thought the world had forgotten them, and churches desperately in need of Bibles.

He prayed, opened his Bible and this is what God said: *"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die."* (Revelation 3:2)

That man became known as Brother Andrew, that verse became his mission – and his trip changed the world.

Brother Andrew founded Open Doors and made countless journeys across Europe, smuggling Bibles in his blue VW Beetle. As the ministry grew, other needs emerged. As well as Bibles, persecuted Christians around the world needed leadership, education, practical support.

Today, we work in more than 70 countries to support Christians who dare to follow Jesus no matter the cost. With your gifts and prayers, millions of persecuted believers know they are not alone.

Thank you for standing with them.

WHAT IS THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?

We define it as: *Christians who live under or who face discrimination, restriction and persecution because of their faith in Jesus.*

Persecution has two forms:

- 1) **Smash** includes violence and even killing.
- 2) **Squeeze** includes pressure, exclusion, discrimination and severe restriction on freedom.

Every year, Open Doors produces the 'World Watch List' of the 50 most dangerous places to follow Jesus.