

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

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TRAVELING THE ROAD OF PERSECUTED LOVE

22 Jan 2010

Listen to these stories; they are true.

In Iran, on November 18 2009, after being held for 259 days, Maryam Rustampoor and Marzieh Amirizadeh were released from Evin Prison in Tehran. They were arrested March 5 by Iranian security forces and labeled, "anti-government activists." Marzieh and Maryam's apartments were searched and their belongings were confiscated. "Their only crime is that they are committed Christians who follow the teachings of Jesus," Farsi Christian News Network reported following their arrest. "They are being unfairly labeled as 'anti-government activists' because of the hostility of the government towards practicing Christians." The women were reportedly interrogated numerous times and were held in three different police detention centers before being sent to Evin Prison. On August 8, they were summoned to court and ordered to deny their faith verbally and in a written statement. They were pressured to recant their faith after the chief interrogator recommended they be charged with apostasy. They stood firm and replied, "We love Jesus. We will not deny our faith." Mr. Haddad aggressively questioned the women during the court proceedings and asked them if they regretted becoming Christians. They replied that they had no regrets. When Maryam and Marzieh made references to their conviction by the Holy Spirit, Haddad told them it was impossible for God to speak to humans. Marzieh boldly asked him if he was questioning God's authority, and he replied that she was not worthy of having God speak to her.

In Colombia on September 21 2009, Pastor Manuel was shot and killed by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas in San Jose del Guaviare, Colombia. FARC guerrillas made an appointment with Pastor Manuel and his family. "He thought they were going to authorize him to have church officially, which he had discussed and asked for before," said VOM contacts. "One of them came in the house with the pastor's wife, Gloria, and his daughter while the pastor was outside. He was shot five times." A FARC guerrilla who was in the house with the rest of the family yelled, "Make sure that dog stays dead," referring to the Pastor. The guerrillas then shot the pastor again, this time in the neck. Following the shooting, Pastor Manuel's wife ran outside and cleaned his face. With the help of her children, she dragged his body under a tree. "She ran and got her Bible and, shaking with tears, preached to all those who go near," VOM contacts said. "Her 10 year old son said, 'mum, don't worry, dad died for Christ and now he is with Christ.'"

In China on June 29, 2009, Paster Dou Shaowen who is currently serving a one-year sentence for "engaging in illegal activities" was secretly transferred to Shifo Re-education Through Labor Center in Zhengzhou city, Henan province, according to China Aid Association. His family was not informed of his transfer. Pastor Dou, his wife Feng Lu, and five other believers were arrested on June 14 when

government officials raided and closed the Rock Church. The police confiscated computers and other church property from the church. Pastor Dou and his wife were sentenced to a year in prison and the other believers were sentenced to 15 days in detention and fined 500 yuan. However, Feng Lu served her sentence at home so she can care for her 12 year old daughter. China Aid reported that Pastor Dou has been treated inhumanely in the labor camp. Pastor Dou was forced to squat when he wanted to talk to police officers, he was forced to work 18 hours a day from 6 am to midnight. Some prisoners contracted diseases while at camp because of overcrowding, more than 70 people sleep in a room, the hot weather, and poor sanitary conditions. Feng Lu attempted to visit her husband in prison, but was told she could not visit him for a month. She is required to report to the Public Security Bureau police regularly, and could be sent to labor camp if she is found “engaging in illegal religious activities” again.

These individuals, and countless others, have traveled this road of persecuted love. For the sake of God’s love, they have risked everything, including their very lives. These individuals hold courageously to their convictions. Though facing imprisonment, Maryam and Marzieh refused to recant their faith. Pastor Manuel stood in front of the FARC guerrillas, and died for Christ. Because he led a congregation, Pastor Dou endured horrid conditions in a Chinese labor camp. All for the sake of God’s love. Christ told his disciples that they too would face persecution because of him. They too would face the risk of God’s love. However, God’s love would endure. Not only would their persecution serve witness to such a love, but they would gain life. He told them of the danger they faced, and that many Christians still face. Their faith may cost them their life. Yet, Christ also spoke of this immense reward— God’s love. Though the love of God involves risk, there is so much more. Lamentations tells us that this love will never fail. We will not be consumed. Romans assures us that nothing will be able to separate us from that love. It’s something about this love that enables those who face death on account of it to have unfailing hope and immense joy. To put aside their life, to disregard the common concerns of life, to deny themselves, and yet live. During the summer after my freshman year at Augustana, I traveled with a missions group to the deserts of China. Currently, China is a closed country, meaning that the government actively harasses, arrests, and tortures many Christians due to their faith. I attended a university in Western China; many students there were burdened by disappointment and felt hopelessness. Over time, I developed friendships with the students. Knowing the risk, I told them of God’s love. I remember one girl, in particular, who could not understand how a God, or any one for that matter, could love her when she had failed her family. As our conversations continued, she began to inquire more about this God. Slowly, something in her eyes began to change. For the first time, she felt hope. She experienced the powerful change brought by God’s love. In further conversations, she told me that though the government might arrest her, she had to tell others about this God who loves. She joyously took the risk of God’s love. Later during the trip, we went to Campus Missions in Pushen Korea. Over 20,000 Christians from around the world came to worship and tell of God’s works. Frequently, people from closed countries would come on the stage and say, “If my government or family knew I was here, I would be killed.” And with their eyes filled with joy, they continued, “But I just had to tell you what God is doing in my country. Jesus Christ is alive.” Their courage and joy astounded me. Many Christians throughout the world face those very same circumstances, yet we often do not travel the road of persecuted love with them.

This reality of the road of persecuted love is often unthinkable for us in America. Either complacent in our various comforts, blinded by our disagreements or even ignorance on our part, we stay almost completely oblivious to the injustices against Christians and those of other faiths. Immersed in a society that emphasizes tolerance, we often forgot to look for incidents of injustice within our own society and within the world. However, sometimes a particular injustice strikes us. We contend that these people suffered unjustly, and that “never again” will we remain silent. This banner, “never again” often quickly fades from our memory. Instead of acting upon the injustices, we argue and debate over theological issues that often do not matter. As we argue over the various methods of communion and when one should be baptized, people die for the same faith we hold. Throughout the world, many die for their simple belief in Jesus Christ, not their views on communion. Somewhere in our theological debates, the risk of God’s love is lost upon us. It seems that we become immune or distracted from the powerfulness of God’s love. We do not take the risk of God’s love. Unlike those who are persecuted for their faith, we do not solely rely on the love of God. Somehow the love of God is no longer the center of our lives. God’s love should push us to take the risk. It is this that should drive us to be more faithful to the true God; one of love, hope, and forgiveness. We must also be strong in our faith; as exhibited by Maryam, Marzieh, Pastors Manuel and Dou, along with many others who stand by Christ despite hostile consequences, faith can be a difficult act. Regardless of the dangers, it is these people we should hold as witnesses of what it means to be a believer. We must travel the road of persecuted love, and we must act. Yet, what does this mean for us? How are we to travel the road of persecuted love, in our situation. Not all of us can go out and stop the persecution. Not all of us can act in bold defiance of a government. But that should not stop us from doing something. We cannot think that we are powerless within our own situation. When I was fundraising for my trip to China, I was introduced to the image of the body of Christ, particularly the hands and feet of Christ. The feet travel to the places we must go, not all of us can be feet. But, we can be the hands of Christ. The hands enable and support the feet as they go. The hands act. They can give financial support, time, or more importantly prayer. We cannot remain silent. We must be the voice for those who travel the road of persecuted love. We must live as they do.

When you entered you received prisoner profiles and other persecution stories. I encourage you if you did not pick one up to do so. Pray for these people and be the hands in your situation.

Thank you, and God’s blessings.

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

FAITH FEST - Volunteers wanted! Faith Fest at Augustana is an annual high school youth retreat. This year we are focusing on raising awareness and money for world hunger. The event is February 13-14, 2010. Volunteers are needed for small group leaders, overnight chaperones, game leaders, concert helpers, and help with a volleyball tournament. Faith Fest will also be packaging food with Kids Against Hunger. If you're interested, please contact Nicole Lauck at nmlauck07@ole.augie.edu or sign up in the Chapel Narthex

ST. DYSMAS - Campus Ministry will be attending worship at the SD State Penitentiary on **Thurs., February 18, 2010**. There will be a sign-up sheet and clearance form available in the chapel office. If you attended the November service your clearance is good for a year. Simply put your name down on the Narthex table sheet. **The forms need to be completed and in to Carol by noon on January 27th.**

HAITI RELIEF - In response to the needs in Haiti, Campus Ministry has collected \$270 which will be distributed to the Lutheran Disaster Relief and the Red Cross. Our thanks to all those who contributed.

Chapel Schedule:

Sunday (24th) Worship, 10 am - Sweet Fellowship Outreach Team
Monday (25th) Worship, 10 am - Meg Koenig, '11
Wednesday (27th) Holy Communion, 10 am - Susan Omanson, "Be Free Ministries" (human trafficking)
INTERIM BREAK - Thurs. Jan., 28th - Wed., Feb.3rd
Friday (5th) Worship, 10 am - Austin VandeBerg, Sr. Spkr.