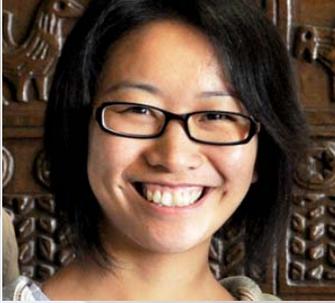


release

ISSUE 54 MARCH/APRIL 2010

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HELP MY PARENTS

says Chinese believer Esther

PAGE 6



GLOBAL IMPACT

The work you supported in 2009

PAGE i

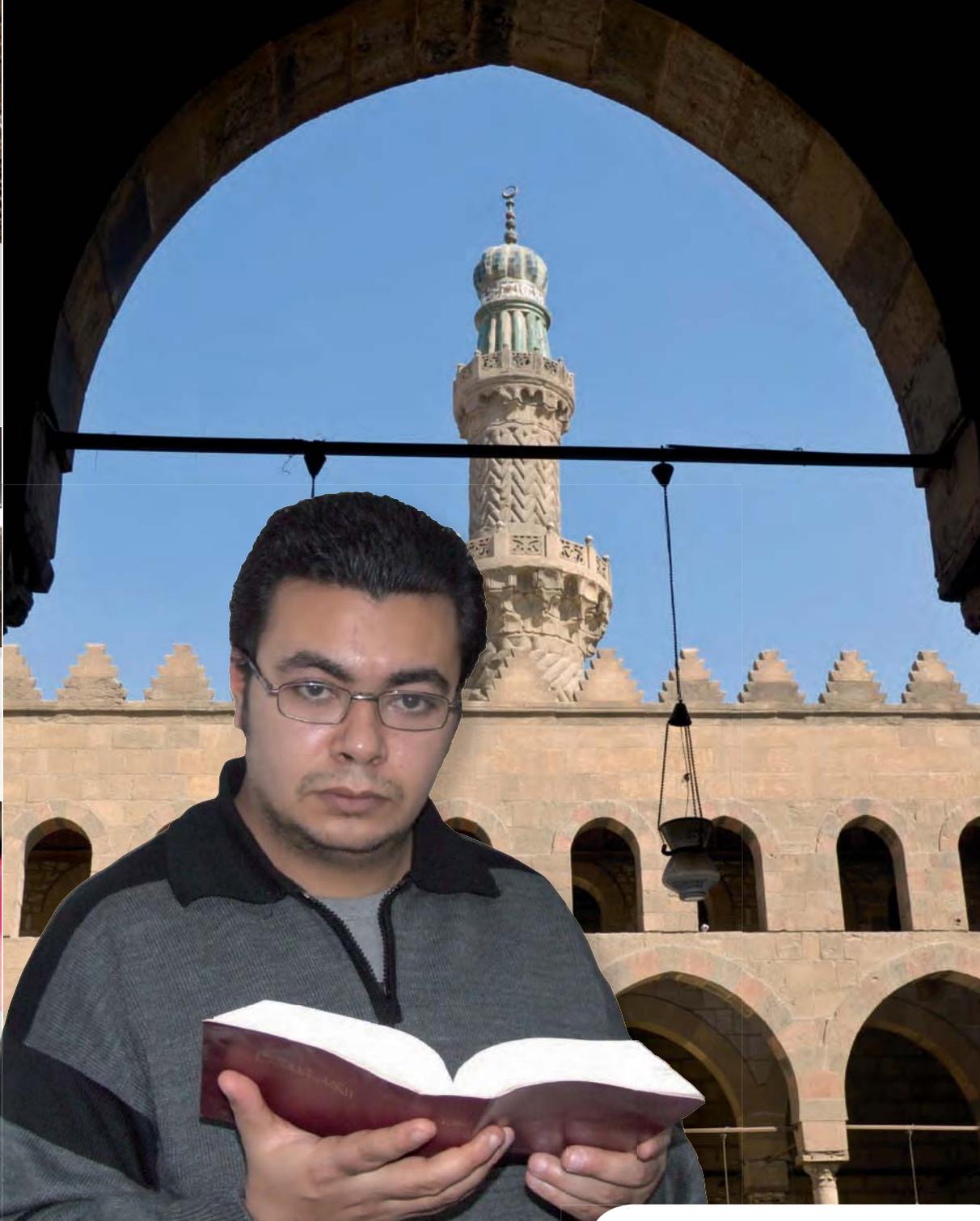


Help us

STAMP OUT INJUSTICE

release:potential

PAGE 7



The Gift of Suffering

release
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voice of persecuted christians

The 'gift of suffering'

'Mary' works secretly to support women who have converted to Christ from a Muslim background. She tells Release's Matt her own remarkable testimony – and why she continues this dangerous ministry.

Mary, not her real name, is a young Egyptian woman and a Christian who converted from Islam. She has agreed to talk to us, to tell the world about her conversion experience and the difficulties she has faced as she tries to follow Jesus with courage and wisdom in a hostile environment. Her legs are shaking with fear.

What will this mean to talk to Western foreigners? Can she trust these visitors – or will they print something that will lead to her re-arrest and detention?

We try to put her at ease, but she has suffered so much that it takes a few moments for her to relax enough to talk.

And then she tells us one of the most moving stories you may ever hear.

'As a girl growing up in an Egyptian Muslim home I was told not to talk to Christians, these infidels who believe in three gods. At the age of eight I was a fanatic but by the age of 11 I began to have questions about my own faith.

BEATEN

'I was 13 when I met a Christian girl at school and as we talked I began to like the person of Jesus, the fact that He was doing good, but when I asked my father to buy me a Bible he beat me severely.

'As a teenager I asked for God's help in my life but I felt no relationship with God. It was only at the age of 19, when I began to work as a secretary for a Christian lawyer that things began to change. It was a problem at first as Muslims shouldn't work for Christians, but he was only a nominal Christian.

'However, I began to read his books on Christianity and my eyes were opened. I saw that Jesus was fair with everyone; He was gentle with the needy and I began to compare Him with the god in Islam.'

TROUBLES

Mary converted to Christianity at the age of 21 and it was then that her troubles really began. It was in the 1990s and religion could not be discussed openly. Fundamentalism was on the rise and Christian converts were being imprisoned.

'They tortured me, pulled out my nails and burnt me. But God gave me a way out.'

Mary, Muslim-background believer

'When I became a Christian I had struggles with my family but there were no Christians to help me. I went to an Orthodox church but nobody helped me. I prayed that I could understand the God I had found but I did not have a Bible, just some verses.'

It wasn't long before Mary had to leave her family and move to another city on her own. She again approached the established church but, fearing that she may have been a spy or that she would bring trouble, they refused to take her in.

'Some priests even told me to return to Islam and my family,' she said.

Eventually, however, after living on the streets for two months, she was helped by an Orthodox priest. She also met other Muslim-background believers for the first time.



NEW VISION

'It was then that God gave me a new vision for my life, to get involved with helping girls who had converted from Islam to Christianity. The problem is that state security tell families where the converted girls are. This happened to me. They told my cousins who were fundamentalists and they kidnapped me for seven days.

'They tortured me, pulled out my nails and burnt me. But God gave me a way out. One day the guard fell asleep and I took the key and escaped.'

Mary is still followed by state security even to this day and has had to change address five times.

'In 2008 the state security beat me and threatened to rape me,' she said.

'The problem is that they tell the families about the girls and they tell their employers that they are converts so they fire them.

'The families also marry off the convert girls to Muslims, while others lock them away in their houses. They treat them like animals and even disfigure the girls' faces with acid. A while ago a girl was poisoned and only two weeks ago one girl told her father about her sister's conversion. He then told the state security and they arrested and tortured her.'

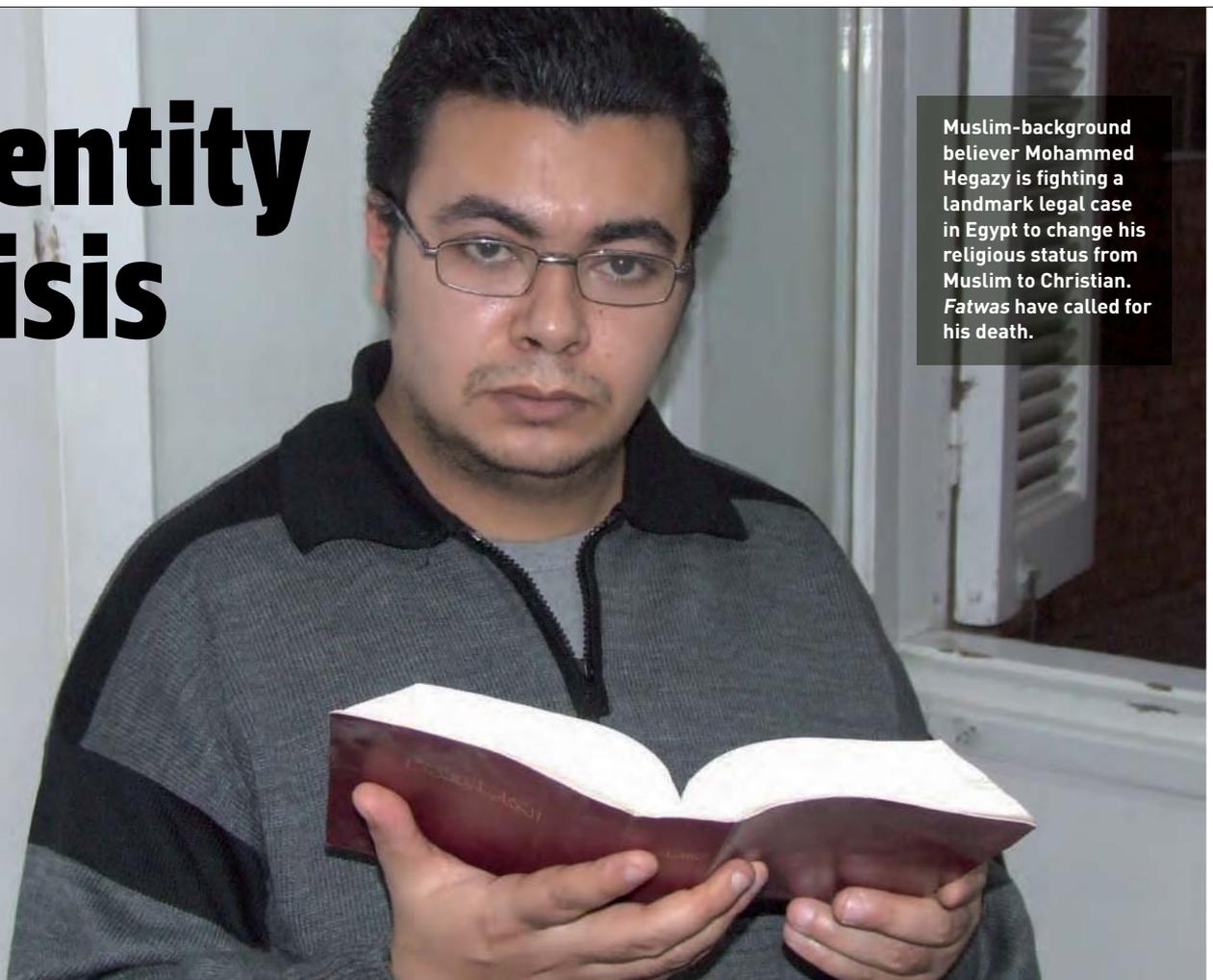
Mary pauses and we take the opportunity to ask her why she carries on working with these girls, given the risks she faces.

'Jesus Christ is someone who is worth doing this for. We have to. It is the gift of suffering for Him. And I believe our country will change as a direct result.'

PRAY FOR ME

Mary asks that Christians in the UK pray that God gives her protection, wisdom and power as she ministers to young girls who convert to Christianity. •

Identity crisis



Muslim-background believer Mohammed Hegazy is fighting a landmark legal case in Egypt to change his religious status from Muslim to Christian. Fatwas have called for his death.

Photo © Release International 2010. Cover background photo: iStockphoto.

After his supernatural encounter with God, Muslim-background believer Mohammed Hegazy was detained and tortured by the authorities. When he took legal action to change his religious status, fatwas called for his death. All he wants is a 'normal' life.

There is something very striking about former Muslim Mohammed Hegazy, and not just the fact that he is happy for us to print his real name and use his picture. What stands out about this young father is that he is just an ordinary person – and yet has caused a legal storm in Egypt that could shake its foundations.

Mohammed became a Christian after a supernatural encounter with God in which Christ spoke to him.

'I was questioning and reading the Bible alone in my room one day when all of a sudden I saw a very strong light in the corner of my room, and I saw a person in that light. It was the first time for me to see that person but at the same time He was not strange. I wanted to ask Him: 'Who are you?' but I couldn't speak. He gave me His hand and said, 'come to me all people with a heavy burden'. He hugged me and after that I felt all of my body was electrified and I found myself on my knees.

'When I went back to my Bible, it was open at that same verse, "Come to me all who have a heavy burden" and it had a red line on that verse. I never used a red pen; I was using only the marker, and I was not reading in that book, but in Genesis.'

TORTURE

Shortly after his conversion, Mohammed was arrested and interrogated. 'I spent three days being interrogated and tortured in the most severe way. I didn't deny my faith and I didn't give [the police] any information about any Christian I knew.'

But Mohammed's story had only just begun. In 2007 after his wife became pregnant he decided to take the unprecedented and dangerous step of asking to change his religious status on his identity card.

'We had suffered a lot because we had "Muslim" as our religion on our ID cards and yet were living as Christians. When my

wife became pregnant I decided to make a stand and ask for my right to change my religion on my ID so that our child could lead a normal life.'

'You cannot imagine how hard the struggle is for converts to be Christian at home yet Muslim elsewhere'

Muslim-background believer Mohammed Hegazy

DEATH THREATS

Mohammed filed the case in July 2007 and by the beginning of August he was being featured in the media and a number of *fatwas* calling for him to be killed were issued. They are still in operation. At the same time Mohammed's house was burned down.

'After that we moved to another house and some fundamentalists came and surrounded the house for a month and a half. When the neighbours called the security, the security came and left the extremists [alone]. Fortunately we had been alerted just hours before so were able to get out in time.'

Mohammed's first attempt to have his ID card changed at court was rejected but he

Continued overleaf...

filed again and is now waiting on an appeal.

'The problem is that the Islamic faith is a part of our constitution. It is the main source of our legislation so that is why you cannot separate the religion from the law.

'I feel that if I cannot change my religion on my ID then I am deceiving the whole of society and creating a new generation able to deceive society, pretending a faith that they are not embracing.

'You cannot imagine how hard the struggle is for converts to be Christian at home yet Muslim elsewhere.'

Like other converts he is worried about the effects of this dual existence on his children. 'I want my children to have a normal life. It is my right to have my real religion on my ID card and I will struggle for it.

ACT AND PRAY

'We need people to talk to governments, to the people in charge, the decision makers, to make a difference, to take one step after prayer. Prayer alone is not enough.

'But please pray. Prayer is the basis of everything. Pray that I will be successful one day because it will affect the whole cause of converts. And pray that Egypt will become a secular state, not a religious one; then I think many people, thousands, will come to Jesus. If the atmosphere of our country changed, many people will embrace a new faith.' •

A terrorist comes to Christ

'John' is living proof that no one is beyond Christ's redemptive power. As a young man in the 1970s he joined an extremist group intent on establishing a strict Islamic society in Egypt. While studying about Islam he was also burning down Christian properties.

'We succeeded to convert many people from Christianity because they were afraid. Others didn't convert and we burned their shops,' he told Release.

His group also destroyed a church. 'I was jailed because of that, but when I was in prison they treated me like a hero. We burned the church from the roof so I am not sure whether there were any people inside or not.'

After his release from prison, the organisation asked him to help write a book to show that God is the God of Islam, not Christianity. As part of his research John began to read the New

Testament, and found himself attracted to the God within.

As John read more, and saw God in a vision, he concluded that Christ must be God. 'Once I was in my room I saw a very bright light coming to me, telling me "Jesus wants you". I was really afraid... My family thought I had gone crazy and sent me to a psychiatrist.'

John's family weren't the only ones to react to this change. 'When my leader learned that I had written about the divinity of Christ, he tried to strangle me.'

Churches were understandably sceptical about John's conversion, even afraid. 'I went to many churches trying to talk to anybody, but no one would talk to me.'

Eventually one person agreed to meet him and from that John was able to start attending church.

You can read more about John's powerful testimony on Release's website at www.releaseinternational.org/egypt

'Once I was in my room I saw a very bright light coming to me, telling me "Jesus wants you".'

Staying on – whatever the cost



'If we go, who will reach the Muslim population here?' says 'Matthew'. 'We know how to reach Muslims because we know the Muslim mind, the people, the culture.

'I will not leave the country because I came to know Jesus Christ in Egypt. Why would He save us here in order for us to leave. He will choose people from Egypt to change Egyptians.'

'Kevin' agrees: 'Most of the churches' advice to the converted is to emigrate. Christian people can be afraid to help because they do not want any trouble, the Muslims hate me and state security don't want any problem between the Christian

and the Muslim. So all different kinds of people here want me to move. But I have decided to stay.'

Kevin's decision is all the more courageous when one considers that he was brutally treated in prison in the past. 'The second time I was in prison they electric shocked me and raped me four times. I was in a coma for one week.'

'Christian', who has been in prison himself, adds: 'Some converts are still leaving because not all of them share the same vision to stay in Egypt. Not all are able to bear the same suffering or persecution. In the past we had a very negative reaction to people who were leaving. We were treating them as traitors but nowadays we are much more mature. We understand that not everyone is able to stand the persecution or even the everyday life of a convert.'

He adds: 'We are also much wiser now in how we share our faith. We understand that the real salt is not to be put obviously on the table but to be put in the food.'

'We have very limited resources,' adds 'Thomas', 'but because of the prayers of the body of Jesus all over the world we are able to continue and to live our life every single day under the Lord's protection. We need your prayers for every aspect of our lives because those prayers are our main support and our backbone.'



The Pyramids and River Nile draw thousands of tourists to Egypt every year.



EGYPT

Population: **83 million**

Capital: **Cairo**

Government: **Republic**

Religion: **Muslim (mostly Sunni) 90%, Coptic Christian 9%, other Christian 1%**

RELEASE'S MINISTRY IN EGYPT

Release currently supports a safe house for Christian women from a Muslim background, and has provided school books and funding for education for children who have lost their parents as a result of persecution.

If you would like to make a financial gift to support the work of Release in Egypt please contact our Supporter Relations Team, or use the back-page coupon, marking your cheque 'Egypt'.

Egypt was predominantly Christian, and a major centre for Christian scholarship, until the initial Islamic invasion in 639 AD. Since then Muslim rule and religion have predominated, although Egypt's Coptic (Orthodox) Christian church never disappeared, despite centuries of persecution and discrimination.

Although Egypt has the largest Christian community in the Middle East, the country's constitution gives preference to Muslims and Christians are treated as second-class citizens, denied political representation, and often discriminated against in education and employment.

While the constitution allows for freedom of conversion, Muslims converting

to Christianity are unable to change their religion or their name on their identity cards. Without the freedom to make this change, Christian women remain designated as Muslims, and are unable to marry Christian men. The children of those designated Muslim are educated as Muslims, even if their parents are Christian. However, Christians who convert to Islam face no difficulty in changing their ID cards.

Muslim-background believers face the greatest dangers. As apostates who have renounced Islam, they are considered to have betrayed their family, their country and their religion. As a result many are rejected by their families, and some have been detained and tortured by the security forces.

Christians are treated as second-class citizens, denied political representation, and often discriminated against in education and employment.

NEW DVD

Find out more about the secret and dangerous lives of Muslim-background believers in Egypt on Release's new 10-minute DVD, available from March 15 for £10. *Staying Power* features the powerful and inspiring testimonies of some of those featured here, including Mohammed Hegazy, and includes specific requests to help you pray for Christians in Egypt. Ideal for use by prayer and house groups in your church.

The DVD can be ordered securely online (www.releaseinternational.org/estore) or by calling our Supporter Relations Team on 01689 823491.

Help my parents

Esther's parents, both pastors in the Linfen Fushan church in China's Shanxi province, were arrested after 400 police and security officials demolished their church in September 2009. Her father Yang Xuan has been sentenced to three and a half years in jail for 'illegal land occupation'. Her mother Yang Caizhen was sentenced without trial to two years' 're-education through labour'. Another eight leaders also received sentences. In this letter Esther explains what happened – and how you can help.



Esther

Dear Friends,

I am very worried about my parents, especially after the Linfen Court sentenced my father to three and a half years' imprisonment on November 25. Five days later, my mother was sentenced to two years' 're-education through labour'.

Before she left, the police informed her relatives to bring some clothes and daily supplies to her. One of her relatives had the chance to briefly meet her and found that she did not look well. She had lost one front tooth; her hair seemed much greyer and her hands a little swollen.

Brothers and sisters, can you imagine how I felt when I heard this? I know my mother better than anyone else. She is just a housewife, dedicated to her faith and diligently serving the Lord. My father is prudent in studying and teaching the Bible; he practises what the Bible teaches. How could he do anything that violates the law?

I feel compelled to share my family's story in the hope that you will see and know their true characters, and the extent of this injustice.

My father Yang Xuan began to serve the Lord full time in 1974, serving in ministry for 35 years. After graduating he had two choices before him: join the [official] Three-Self Church¹, enjoy a stable income, a

peaceful life and a promising future; or join a house church by faith, which would not guarantee anything for his life.

After fervent prayer, he chose to join a house church, which he believed to be in accordance with biblical teaching. My father has always clearly understood what he chose in that moment.

In 1994, my father moved the whole family to Linfen. At that time, the churches in Linfen had recently separated from the Three-Self churches. Many brothers and sisters did not have a place to worship, and so assembled in the backyards of some church members' houses. The congregation grew from 50 to 700 members.

Crowded

It would get so crowded that the late-comers would have to move into additional houses, just to listen to the sermons. All these sites were scattered at different places, so my father had to run around to preach in several different homes.

My mother Yang Caizhen had been a doctor; she maintained a stable job and income. But she quit her job to support my father and his ministry. Sometimes, she had to work part-time.

This was my family, busy and full of joy. Then the events of September 13 struck me.

I did not know something had happened until I tried, but was unable, to contact my parents by phone.

Eventually I learned about the incident from my relatives and friends, and in early October, I learned from the internet that my parents had been arrested and jailed. I am so concerned for my parents' health.

My dear Christian brothers, sisters and churches, I am letting you know the harsh circumstances that dedicated Christians are facing in mainland China.

My father and mother are being persecuted like many other Christians and house churches. All we ask for is the freedom to worship and share the Gospel.

As the New Year begins, please remember Chinese Christians in your prayers and appeal for them! I call upon everyone to fight for religious freedom in China, and to continue to pray for the deliverance of my parents, and justice for all the imprisoned leaders.

Thank you!

Esther Yang Xue



Pastor Yang Xuan

¹ The Three-Self Church, also known as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), was created to serve the communist Chinese Government, and is the only officially recognised Protestant church. It has an estimated 20 million members. House churches are independent and unregistered, and therefore deemed 'illegal' by the Government. The total number of house church believers is estimated to be between 30 and 80 million.

Release International is actively supporting the imprisoned Linfen Fushan church leaders by helping with their legal defence fund and supporting the families of those in prison through our Release:Prisoners ministry.

If you would like to read the full story about the Linfen Church leaders, or want to make a donation to support these and other Christian prisoners and their families, please visit our website www.releaseinternational.org/prisoners