



THE **Voice** OF THE **Martyrs**

April 2024

BURKINA FASO

WHERE PASTORS ARE TARGETED



16 DAYS
A WIDOW

WITNESSING
AMONG MILITANTS

MANDATORY ISLAMIC
TRAINING FOR CHILDREN



"Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." Heb 13:3



Admirable, Exemplary

Today, many people display such admiration and devotion to celebrities that it may even be considered worship. We must take care to embrace scriptural principles of humility and service while guarding against such worldly ideas and behaviours.

As we work to reject and oppose our culture's fallenness in this area, however, it can be striking to come across a clear scriptural theme of Believers being inspired not only by Christ's example but also by the examples of other Christians. This theme is especially prevalent in Paul's epistles, and in Philippians 3:17 we see him go so far as to instruct others to follow his personal example. **"Wait," we might say, "isn't that egotistical? Are we really meant to imitate other Believers?"**

Man-centered values and ideas run contrary to our Christian faith. Christ must be the central focus of our thinking, and no other person may be allowed to take His place in our hearts and minds. He is not just a good example for us — He is the proper object of our worship. He is, as Thomas declares, "My Lord and my God!" Christ must be discussed first when we talk about others' examples, and Paul does so beautifully in Philippians 2:5-11.

But Scripture also points to the examples of other Christians as inspiration for our faith. Consider Hebrews 12:1, which describes Believers as "so great a cloud of witnesses", along with "looking to Christ" (v. 2), it is critical to set aside sin and "run our race with endurance."

The stories in this month's newsletter showcase exemplary acts of faith. But even the most bold and faithful among our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters will never be perfect. We admire *everything* about Christ, but we must be careful to selectively admire each other. We imitate one another in the specific ways each of us displays Christ's goodness and glory.

How can we be inspired by Pastor Pierre's persistence and dependence upon God as he proclaims the Gospel to those who have been driven from their homes by Islamists? How can we imitate our dear sister Yasmine, who voices love instead of hate as she reflects on her husband's death at the hands of Islamic extremists? What does David's example spur within us as we learn of his faithfulness to Christ despite being driven from village to village by those opposed to the Gospel?

We are enriched by meeting these imperfect but exemplary disciples, and we would do well to imitate them as they imitate Christ Jesus our Lord. Our fellowship with them is not at the expense of Christ's glory, but to its great increase in our lives.

Ashley

About the cover: Pastor David and his wife, Esther, have had to flee their home multiple times because of death threats from Muslim extremists.



A Displaced Pastor REACHES THE DISPLACED

Surrounded by a group of about 80 people, including Muslims, Pastor Pierre Lassane uses a tattered flip chart to explain the Gospel. Everyone in the group has taken refuge at this former elementary school, now a camp for internally displaced people (IDP), after fleeing from Islamic terrorists who have attacked areas of Burkina Faso in recent

years. The Muslims in the camp have suffered greatly at the hands of Islamists, followers of their own religion, making them more open to Pierre's hopeful message.

"Before the terrorists came, the Muslims didn't want to listen to us," Pierre said. "If they saw you, they didn't want to talk to you." Now when Pierre goes to the displaced, they are coming to

listen and are placing their faith in Christ.

Seeing the Truth

Roughly 1.7 million people in Burkina Faso have been forced to flee from Islamist groups that have invaded from the neighbouring countries of Mali and Niger since 2016. And the militants often kill Muslims as well as Christians.

Pierre was once a fervent Muslim



“Before the terrorists came, the Muslims didn’t want to listen to us.”

himself. Then, in 1985, when he was 21 years old, his older brother became ill and doctors were unable to help him. Pierre and his brother eventually visited a pastor, and after the pastor prayed for his brother he recovered from his illness.

The pastor also shared Bible stories that shocked Pierre. “When the pastor was preaching and telling the story concerning Jesus, it wasn’t the same

story we read in the Quran,” he said. The pastor’s teaching opened Pierre’s eyes to the truth of the Gospel, and he placed his faith in Christ that day.

When he started telling others about his Saviour, Jesus Christ, most of his family and the entire village rejected him. Pierre’s father kicked him and his wife out of their shared home, forcing the couple to live on land that locals considered to be

cursed by evil spirits.

“They were saying that we would not live for a week,” Pierre said. When he and his wife became ill shortly after moving onto the land, people in the community naturally believed it was a spiritual attack.

Pierre began to fast and pray, crying out to God to intervene. Just over two weeks later, he had a vision in which a deadly snake chased him until a bright



light made it disappear. Then, a short time after Pierre had the vision, a tree that the community believed harboured evil spirits came crashing down in a storm. Pierre set it on fire the next day, and he and his wife soon recovered fully from their illness. Because they did not die, many people in the village began to listen as he shared the Gospel.

In the years that followed, Pierre worked a variety of jobs in other parts of Burkina Faso as well as in neighbouring Cameroon, but he felt called to ministry work. In 2001, he attended Bible school and then returned to his home village as an ordained minister. Some in his village were willing to listen to the Gospel, but his father, who practiced a mix of Islam and tribal spiritism, still rejected it.

His father never came to faith in Christ, but Pierre persevered in his ministry work, eventually planting five churches in the area around his village in Burkina Faso. He served those churches faithfully for years, until the day the terrorists attacked.

Islamist Attack

While Islamists have attacked Muslims and Christians indiscriminately in Burkina Faso, Christians have been a primary target of their campaign since April 2019. In May of that year, militants attacked a village 20 kilometres from Pierre's home, killing a local pastor and four deacons. The militants often target church leaders in

Burkina Faso because they hinder the establishment of an Islamic state.

Two days after that attack, about 40 armed men rode into Pierre's village on motorcycles around 9pm and made it known they were looking for the village pastor. A friend immediately called Pierre to warn him. "He told me they want to kill me," Pierre said.

Pierre's wife, who was cooking, dropped everything and ran with him into the woods. From their hiding place, they watched as the armed men searched the village for them. "They didn't find us in our house," Pierre said. "They went to our neighbours, and they killed two men."

Pierre and his wife eventually located their eight children, some of whom had been tending to their animals in the fields. The family then fled on foot, walking 41 kilometres to reach safety.

The Islamists attacked dozens of villages in 2019, forcing about 60,000 people in the region to flee their homes and seek shelter farther south, near Burkina Faso's capital city, Ouagadougou. Entire church congregations fled on foot, leaving behind all of their crops and livestock, their main sources of income. "We couldn't bring food and clothes, nothing," Pierre recalled, adding that he and his wife didn't sleep well for months afterward.

A Way to Continue

Local churches were overwhelmed

"He told me they want to kill me."

by the needs of their displaced brothers and sisters in Christ. They determined that one of the best ways to help the displaced pastors and their congregations was to teach them how to start small, self-sustaining businesses that didn't require a plot of land.

With VOM's help, Burkinabe church leaders created a programme to train more than 140 displaced pastors, including Pierre, to raise poultry. The pastors attended a three-day course in which a Christian professor from a local agricultural college taught them how to raise chickens. Afterward, all of the pastors received some chicks to get them started in the business.

Some of the pastors say poultry farming has kept them alive since they no longer have fields to cultivate, and it also provides an income to support their ministry work. After months living as refugees, Pierre and his family eventually found a small house to rent about 100 kilometres north of Ouagadougou; they share their home with 20 other displaced people.

▼ Islamists have attacked hundreds of villages in Burkina Faso in the last few years, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee their homes.





▲ Pastor Pierre uses a tattered flip chart to share the Gospel with Muslims living in camps for displaced people.

Pierre uses some of the money he earns from poultry farming to purchase fuel that enables him to reach more people with the Gospel. Using an audio Bible he received from VOM, he preaches and teaches among the refugees in his city. “The people don’t have anything to do,” he said, “so they want to listen to the Bible. Many are giving their lives to Christ.”

Even in the relative safety of his new location, however, Pierre still occasionally encounters Islamic militants. “Three days ago, we went to a village to evangelize,” he said. “When I was coming back, the terrorists and the military were shooting. I entered where they were shooting. There was fighting and I didn’t know what to do.”

While they were caught in the crossfire, a military plane bombed the militants, enabling Pierre to escape. He said close calls like that will not keep him from doing the work of an evangelist, a role he believes God has confirmed for his life.

Before being forced to flee from his home in May 2019, Pierre had a dream about Stephen, the first martyr. In the dream, he said the Lord told him that while he will have difficulties, he will not die. The dream, he said, ended with a command: “I want you to continue your ministry.”

So with his tattered flip chart in hand, Pierre carries on, committed to doing all he can to help displaced people in Burkina Faso find eternal hope in Christ. ■

“I want you to continue your ministry”



SOWING GOSPEL SEED in a Dangerous Land

Editor's note: Yasmine Siadau shared her story with us 16 days after her husband's murder.

Yasmine was outside her home chatting with a friend when they heard gunfire down the street. "I saw them coming, shooting," Yasmine recalled. "I went to the house to tell my husband to come out because the bad people are coming."

Islamic extremists have ravaged large areas of Burkina Faso since 2016. Two notable militant groups in the region are the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam, or JNIM, which translates as "The Group Supporting Islam and Muslims." Using the vast deserts of neighbouring Mali and Niger as a safe haven, the groups attack without warning, taking advantage of Burkina Faso's limited military capability. "The terrorists are better armed than the army," a local pastor said.

Islamist groups have taken control of roughly 40% of Burkina Faso, killed more than 10,000 people and forced about 1.7 million, including many Muslims, to flee their homes and take refuge in camps for internally displaced people. The militants have specifically targeted Christians in the country since 2019, often focusing their attacks on pastors and Christian leaders as they seek to create an Islamic caliphate. One denomination reported that 500 pastors have been forced to flee in the past few years because of Islamist activity.

On 15 May, 2023, gunmen attacked Yasmine's town, located in northern Burkina Faso near the border with Mali. Her husband, Pastor Laurent Siadau, urged her to leave with him on their small motorcycle. But Yasmine didn't want to leave her friend, so she decided to flee with her on foot while Laurent sped away on the motorcycle.

Hearing more gunshots behind them, the women ran into the forest and eventually found shelter in another town. Back in Yasmine's town, government forces had arrived to confront the terrorists. Fighting between the Islamists and the military prevented Yasmine from returning home for more than 24 hours, and she was unable to reach her husband on his cellphone.

“My heart’s desire is for God to make his Spirit meet these people and change their hearts like He met Saul on the way to Damascus.”

When she was able to return home, Yasmine was shocked to see Laurent’s motorcycle lying outside their house. Two of her adult sons told her that for unknown reasons he had run to the church next door, presumably to hide, and was shot in the head by Islamists inside the church.

Laurent had not been in full-time ministry very long. For most of his life he had worked as a cook in the country’s capital, Ouagadougou. But in 2018, after all but one of his five children were grown, he began attending Bible school. And two years later, he sensed God calling him to minister in northern Burkina Faso, where Islamic extremists were already active and where many people were either Muslims or animists.

Yasmine said reaching people in that region was similar to working on a farm. “In the village, the Gospel is like seed,” she said. She and Laurent planted Gospel seeds and worked hard to cultivate them. And Yasmine said that a fruit of Laurent’s prayer ministry was seeing his neighbours freed from spiritual oppression. “When I remember that,” she said, “I am very happy.”

One of the couple’s sons, Marcel, recalled that not everyone in the family was in favour of their move to the dangerous region of northern Burkina Faso. Aunts, uncles and other relatives warned him, “Don’t let your father go to

that village; they don’t want him there.”

But Marcel said his father was committed to his call of working to advance the Gospel. “He always told them that God called him to this village ...,” Marcel said, “and he must go to fulfill what God called him to do.”

Despite the brutality and injustice of Laurent’s murder, Yasmine said she does not feel anger toward his killers. “My heart’s desire is for God to make His Spirit meet these people,” she said, “and change their hearts like He met Saul on the way to Damascus.”

Marcel, too, prays that those who killed his father will repent and come to know the Lord “so one day they can also go to heaven.” Currently studying at a Bible training school, he is determined to follow in his father’s footsteps and enter the ministry.

“Pray for me to get involved in the ministry when I am finished,” Marcel said. “And pray for my uncles and other relatives who don’t know Jesus to meet Jesus and know that my father didn’t die for nothing. He died for the faith. He died for the Gospel.”

Yasmine also requested prayer for perseverance in the faith. “Pray for me,” she said, “so God can comfort me and I will stay right in my faith until the end. I will see my husband there. That is my will and my wish.”

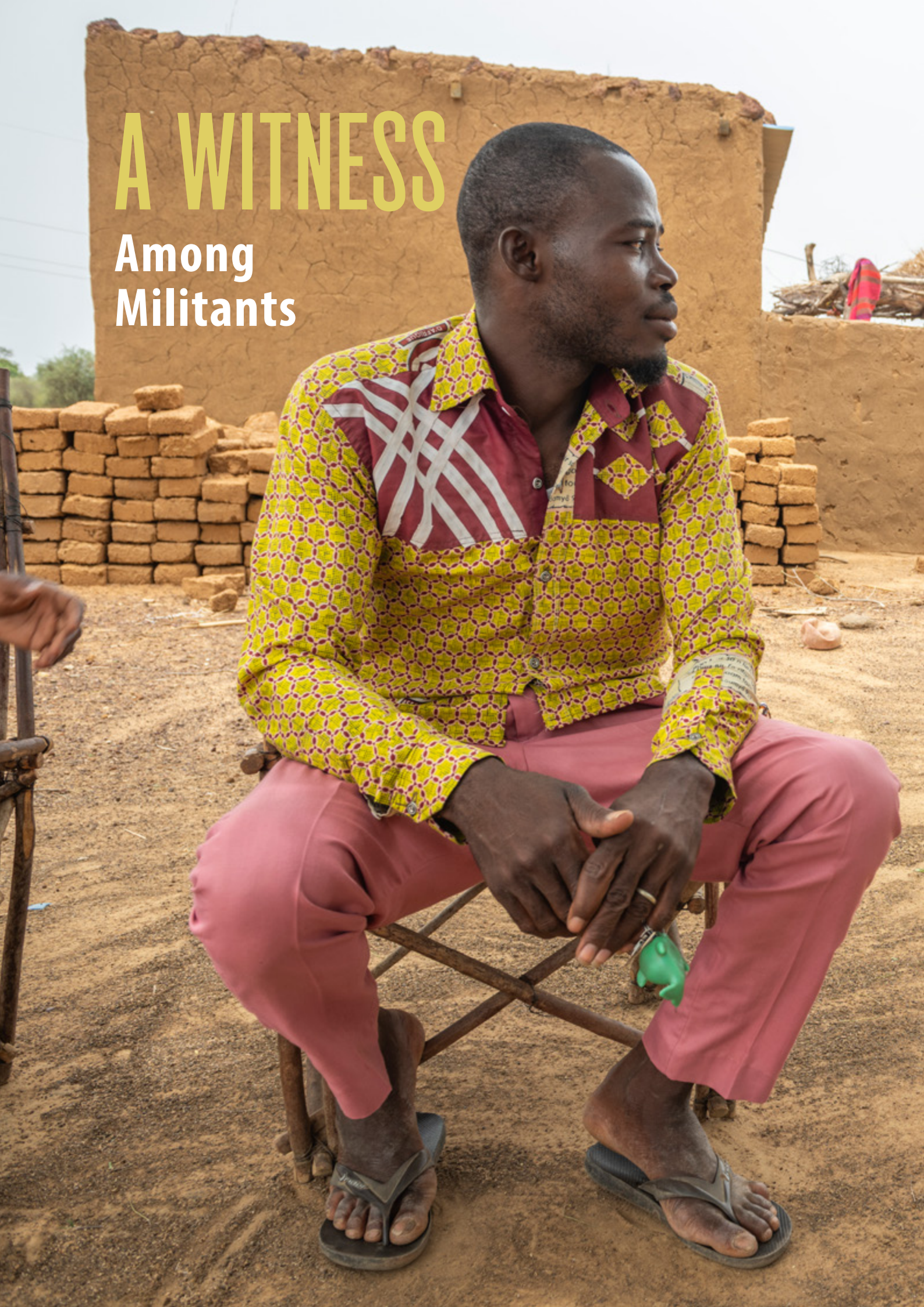
While still in the early stages of grief, Yasmine said she warmly recalls the work that she and Laurent did together, sowing Gospel seeds in northern Burkina Faso. “I am really happy for what we have done there,” she said, “because many people have given their lives to Jesus Christ.” ■



► Since her husband’s murder, Yasmine has taken comfort from prayer with her family.

A WITNESS

Among
Militants



For years, David wanted nothing more than to become a tailor. But soon after he achieved his goal, God gave him a bigger vision.

Having grown up as the son of a pastor, he suddenly felt led to enroll in Bible school and enter the ministry in Burkina Faso, which is more than 50% Muslim. Initially, David resisted God's call, but he also sensed strongly that his life was in the Lord's hands. "I saw that God is writing the end of my life," he said. "He must do what He wants with me."

When David told his father about the calling he felt from God, his father told him to go to the Bible school and trust God.

"He didn't have money or the means for me," David said, "and he told me, 'Go. God will take care of it.' I went to the Bible school, and I obeyed God."

Sent to the Desert

A year into his studies at the Bible school, David met a woman named Esther, whom he married in 2017, their final year of school. As they completed their education, Islamist violence in Burkina Faso had already claimed the lives of more than 2,000 people and displaced 1.7 million others. Still, the couple was determined to heed God's call.

After graduating in May, David planned to return to the area where he grew up, in northern Burkina Faso. But a ministry leader urged David and Esther to go to a village in a different part of the country.

A short time later, ministry leaders took David, Esther and all their luggage to a village in the desert. And after

one quick look around, the couple felt hopeless.

There was no structure for a church to meet or even a place for them to live. In addition, there was no cell service, and they had to walk more than 9 kilometres to collect water after a rain. They wanted to share the Gospel with the nomadic

"It was a difficult, hard time, but we rejoiced because the people gave their lives to Jesus Christ."

Fulani people who lived in the area, but not a single member of the community welcomed them into their homes.

Initially, David and Esther wanted to leave. They cried about their miserable living conditions and seemingly hopeless ministry prospects. "The people didn't want to hear about Christianity," David said. "But I was encouraged by the Holy Spirit, and I had the strength to go ahead in spite of difficulties."

Over time, the couple built relationships with the villagers, praying for them even though they practiced a syncretistic blend of Islam and witchcraft. When the villagers saw the couple's prayers answered, including those for healing, they were eager to

learn more about Jesus and the Bible. Eventually, David and Esther's church grew to more than 20 people.

"We were happy," David said. "It was a difficult, hard time, but we rejoiced because the people gave their lives to Jesus Christ."

A Planned Attack

The joy they felt at seeing Fulani Muslims come to faith in Christ was tempered by increasing Islamist activity in the community. At one point, the couple saw militants shoot people just outside the village.

"The extremists were our neighbours," David said, "and they came to meet us sometimes, to speak with us. The terrorists came to ask us, 'Did you hear about the military? Do you think we will win the war, or will the military win the war?'"

Even as David and Esther's church continued to grow, Islamists kidnapped a pastor in a nearby village and took him to Mali. After hearing about the pastor's abduction, Esther wanted to leave. David, however, was adamant about staying.

Then, one day a member of the church came to the couple's house with alarming news. The church member had heard that militants were planning to kidnap David, his family and the church members before taking them to a riverbank and killing them.

Word of the planned attack quickly spread among church members, who were naturally frightened. "They didn't want to come to the church," David said. "One Sunday, I played the drum and my wife was singing. We were the only two in the church worshipping. Nobody was there."

As Esther prayed one night, she felt deeply troubled about their situation. After expressing her concerns to David, they went to a safer location for four days, and David returned to the village alone.

Soon, a friend of David who lived near the militants brought him an urgent warning. "He told me to flee because they were going to come and kill me," David said. "They didn't want to capture me; they wanted to kill me."

David left his belongings behind and went to be with his wife. Since returning to the village was considered too great a risk, the couple eventually was



◀ Despite ongoing opposition, Burkinabe Christians faithfully gather for worship and fellowship.

reassigned to plant a church in another village. But they were stunned by what awaited them.

"It was worse," David said. "The first village was better than this one."

A Harder Assignment

In March 2018, David and Esther started over in the new village. Once again, they had no place to live and few belongings. "We didn't have anything," David said, "but someone gave us a place to start the church there."

As they worked to build relationships with villagers, the couple quickly faced opposition. When a local imam learned of the couple's plans to start a church, he told Muslims at the mosque that Islam is the only religion they should follow. Some who heard his instruction told the couple that the imam's words could lead to trouble for them. And one man warned them of the Islamists' lethal tactics.

"They usually come to tell people to come to the mosque," the man said. "If you don't go, they will come and kill you."

Despite the warnings, David and Esther remained in the village for nearly two years. David grew his beard out to blend in with the Muslim men, and although they could have left for their own safety, they were encouraged to see 26 people place their faith in Christ.

After one woman heard the Gospel and came to faith in Christ, her Muslim husband grew angry and demanded that she leave the church. Although the man was known to have a volatile temper, often threatening to kill people, David decided to meet with him. When the man heard and understood the Gospel, his heart began to soften toward the Christian faith. He told David he had been visiting a witchdoctor for some time and believed that was causing him to hate people. He soon abandoned the practice and decided to burn everything he had that was related to witchcraft.

As villagers continued to respond to the Gospel, the militants began to make themselves more visible. David and Esther once saw 40 of them in a group, brandishing guns and flags. And eventually, the militants increased their pressure on the couple.

"They told us they didn't want us to do church meetings or ... hear our singing," David recalled. "Before, we got along, but when we decided to build a church, they told us we couldn't do that. They didn't want us to have faith in Jesus."

The Islamists threatened to kidnap David if he and Esther didn't comply, but

Esther couldn't bring herself to tell her husband she wanted to leave. Instead, she asked him if she could travel to another village to visit her parents, whom she hadn't seen in years.

Esther wasn't the only one concerned for their safety. As ministry leaders learned more details of the situation in David's village, they urged him to flee immediately.

But David hesitated. "I didn't want to flee, because I told people that God sent me to this village and allowed me to come here," he said. "I prayed and asked God, 'What will I do?' He didn't answer me, but that night I had a dream where someone told me, 'You must flee because your ministry is ending here.'"

David prepared to leave the village, but he continued to minister there for another three months, waiting for the right moment.

Then, one day near the end of 2019, the militants sent someone to David's house to escort him to the mosque. Remembering the warning he had received about the Islamists' tactics, David followed the man for a while on his motorbike before turning around and returning home.

"I saw that I was now in danger and I must flee," he said.

The Work Continues

After leaving the second village, the couple moved to Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso's capital, in May 2021. When David told ministry leaders that he wanted to continue his work in the

region, they suggested a few locations, but David didn't feel peace about any of them. Instead, he decided to remain near Ouagadougou, another majority-Muslim area.

"We were praying," Esther said, "telling God we want to continue the ministry."

The couple have had great difficulty growing a church in the area where they now live; after two years, only eight people attend services. Five of the Believers at their church left Islam to follow Christ, and most came to faith after David and Esther prayed for them and they received healing of mental or physical illness. "It is because of our sovereign God," David said.

In 2022, David received training in how to support his family through poultry farming. "Without the ... programme, we would have to flee and we wouldn't be able to live here," he said.

Islamists continue to attack villages throughout Burkina Faso, killing innocent people, and Christians remain frequent targets. David stays in contact with many of his former church members, some of whom say the militants have threatened to kill them if they don't return to Islam.

Reflecting on the challenges his flock has faced throughout the years, David reaffirmed his own strong convictions as well his confidence in the faith of those he and Esther have led to Christ.

"Some of them didn't want to speak with me," he said. "Some of them left and didn't want to be Christian again. I know some of them will stay, though. Whatever difficulties may come, they will not forsake Jesus Christ. Also, even if they want to kill me, I will say, 'Yes, I know Jesus.'" ■



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Prayer Diary[®]

April/May 2024

APRIL 2024

S	21	BHUTAN	Pray that God's Word will spread throughout Bhutan, as the government tries to restrict widespread Bible distribution.
M	22	TAJIKISTAN	Pray that Christians summoned for questioning by secret police will experience the Holy Spirit's guidance.
T	23	COLOMBIA	Pray for Christians sharing the Gospel in rural areas where paramilitary groups have become more active and violent.
W	24	NIGER	Pray that the small number of Christians will faithfully share the love of Christ with their Muslim neighbours.
T	25	INDONESIA	Pray that Muslims in Aceh province will see the harshness of Islamic law and seek freedom in Christ (Romans 7:6).
F	26	ERITREA	The government track each Bible sold. Pray that God's Word will flood the country despite these restrictions.
S	27	YEMEN	Pray that churches will continue to worship and proclaim the Gospel after being attacked.
S	28	CUBA	Pastors in Cuba ask for prayer that they will continue to stand firm in their faith.
M	29	PAKISTAN	Pray for the protection of young Christian women from forced marriages, a common tactic of Islamic extremists.
T	30	UGANDA	Pray for the effective training of leaders to share the Gospel with Muslims and help those who are persecuted.

MAY 2024

W	1	SOUTHERN MEXICO	Praise God for the vocational training many are receiving through the "houses of refuge" ministry!
T	2	NORTH KOREA	Pray for innovative ways to get God's Word into North Korea.
F	3	INDIA	Pray for pastors, church planters and evangelists who face criminal charges under anti-conversion laws.
S	4	TURKEY	Pray for the strength and courage of a teenage boy who was beaten for wearing a cross necklace.
S	5	NIGERIA	Pray for Tina whose husband was shot by Islamists while working on his vegetable farm.
M	6	BRUNEI	Despite their surveillance by religious police, pray that churches will be fearless in reaching Muslims for Christ.
T	7	LIBYA	Pray that the small number of Libyan Christians will find fellowship with other Believers.
W	8	PHILIPPINES	Christians on Mindanao live under constant threat of attack. Pray for their peace and joy.
T	9	NEPAL	Pray for 16-year-old Khushi and her three sisters whose father abused them because of their Christian faith.
F	10	MOROCCO	Pray for Front-Line Workers who distribute digital Bibles through creative methods.
S	11	ISRAEL**	Pray for those who take the risk of owning a Bible in Islamist controlled areas.
S	12	LEBANON	Pray that Pastor Bassam's church, which helps refugees, will be allowed to operate without government interference.
M	13	IRAN	Pray for imprisoned Christians in Iran who are suffering from various ailments.
T	14	AFGHANISTAN	Pray for new leaders to disciple young Christians in the country.
W	15	CHINA	Pray that invasive technologies such as facial-recognition software will not hinder the spread of the Gospel.
T	16	CAR*	Bibles are often destroyed by Islamist rebels. Pray for efforts to get a Bible to every Believer.
F	17	MOZAMBIQUE	Audio Bibles are in great demand. Pray that they reach the hands of those hungry for God's Word.
S	18	BANGLADESH	Pray that house-churches in Dhaka, the most densely populated city in the world, will bring light and hope.

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