

From persecution to witness

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



For many months now people have been asking for some kind of statement about the persecution of Christians around the world. It seems to be a straight-forward issue. Christians are suffering in Iraq and Syria, in Nigeria and Egypt. Palestinian Christians encounter

intense pressure. Christians in some parts of India are threatened. Some would even claim that U.S. Christians are under siege. Atrocities committed against Christians by the Islamic State, Boko Haram, al-Shabab and others are regularly in the news. We hear that more Christians have been martyred in recent years than in the first three centuries of the Christian movement.

Each circumstance of violence against Christians is deeply painful. There are brothers and sisters around the world whose lives are part of the passion of Christ. People are targeted in some countries because they are Christians. But this is a complex issue. Are Christians suffering and dying as witnesses to the faith? Yes. But in many places interreligious conflict has been used as a calculated pretext for political gain. A narrative of religion vs. religion, or religion vs. society, is an effective way of generating support for one's cause. And, regrettably, suspicion and fear of the "other" leads to intolerance and discrimination.

The persecution of Christians is not new. Martyrs have existed since the beginning of the church. Stephen was martyred with the consent of Paul, who was martyred by the Roman Empire. Paul quoted the psalms, writing: "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered" (Romans 8:36).

Outrage is a natural reaction to beheadings and crucifixions. The instinct to strike back is understandable. Many Lutherans accept that in a broken world deadly force might be needed. Revenge, however, is not an option for a Christian.

I pray that none of you ever suffers violence for the faith, but every generation has faced hostility. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering

which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ."

"Martyr" is a Greek word that means "witness," "to give testimony." A witness can also be a symbol that testifies a promised action has been accomplished. When we speak about the persecution of Christians, the real question is: "What will be our witness?"

Here is a story about how some Lutherans in Ethiopia answered that question. It happened in one of our companion synods. Some Muslims burned down a church, thinking they were attacking Roman Catholics. Instead, they burned down a Lutheran church by mistake. They were arrested and sent to jail. In that region it's the responsibility of families to take care of prisoners' hygiene and food. Instead, members of the Lutheran church asked authorities if they could dig the prisoners' latrines and feed them. That was their witness in the face of persecution.

Christians aren't the only ones being targeted and persecuted. More Muslims have reportedly been killed by the Islamic State than any other group. Our witness must be as peacemakers and as defenders of religious minorities in our country and around the world. We must be the ones who speak out when entire religions are falsely characterized by the actions of extremists. We would not accept Christianity being defined by the Ku Klux Klan or the Christian Identity movement. We should not define entire communities by the distortion of their religion.

The cross is God's visual symbol that a promised action has been accomplished. It is God's stake in the sand. It is God's witness to the truth that "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39). 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: bishop@elca.org.