

Unusual Missions

LESSON 3: CHURCHES SERVING GOD IN SECRET

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AIM

To be challenged by the commitment of Christians who are persecuted and must worship underground.

LESSON INFORMATION

Introduction

What would it be like for our church to be forced to meet in secret? What would it be like to be fearful about sharing our faith? Most Christians do not know and will never know how some of our brothers and sisters suffer for their faith in Christ. “But I [Jesus] tell you: ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’” (Matt. 5:44, NIV).

Since the death of Jesus Christ, 43 million Christians have become martyrs. Over 50% of these martyrs were in the last century. More than 200 million Christians face persecution each day. Every day over 300 are killed for their faith in Christ. (Source: *Christian in Crisis*)

There are many examples of persecution of Christians. In 2004 an evangelical missionary was stabbed in an attack by 10 people who broke into his home. More than 100 Christian leaders attending a retreat were arrested by 50 police. A 34-year-old woman was beaten to death for handing out Bibles. A Christian politician was kidnapped, tortured, and suffered death threats. A mob of 300 attacked a church, destroying its contents and setting a car on fire. A man was crucified on a cross by police. His family was threatened not to tell or they would be killed too.

The Church of the Nazarene is now working in some world areas that are not safe for Christians to openly declare their faith. Missionaries and national church leaders face dangers in their daily lives. Therefore, the church cannot identify those world areas or the personnel.

These unidentified locations are called creative access areas. This simply means that entry into and work within these countries must be done in “creative” ways. In 2004 the Church of the Nazarene had eight creative access areas in the regions of Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Eurasia.

Testimony of Pastor Coy (not his real name)

Pastor Coy is a minister in the Church of the Nazarene in a creative access area. He was born into a Buddhist family. Because of war in his country, his family moved to another town when he was eight years old. He was sent to live in a big city with his uncle, a Buddhist monk, who accepted him as an adopted son. Later, he was sent to live in a Buddhist orphanage to study. He lost his innocence of childhood, felt abandoned, hated everyone, and considered everyone around him dishonest. He was angry with his parents and wanted them to suffer for abandoning him.

In 1975 his adoptive father was arrested and imprisoned. The orphanage was dissolved, and Coy returned to his home village to find his family. He lived there for seven years. After high school, he was drafted as a soldier. Although he was afraid and wanted to leave the army, he knew he would die if he were caught. Four years later, he returned home, sick and addicted to alcohol and heroin.

Miraculously, his adoptive father was converted and began to tell Coy about Jesus and the peace He can bring. Coy began reading the Bible and found God's love. He told God that he would serve Him the rest of his life. He was introduced to the Church of the Nazarene through a spiritual theology class. Since 1975, Coy has been a Nazarene pastor.

Coy has suffered many persecutions. He has been falsely accused of illegal preaching and breaking the law, interrogated many times and forced to pay fines. He was not allowed to travel. In spite of all this, God gave His blessing and grace to the church.

There have been many miracles in Coy's ministry. For example, members of a family who had eaten poisoned food and were dying prayed to God and He healed the whole family. Another time God saved several people who were demon-possessed, and many people witnessed the deliverance.

During a Christmas service, the government sent a delegation to inspect the activities of Coy's church. He recognized the leader of this delegation who had served in the same military unit with Coy. Though Coy considered him a dear friend, they had not seen each other for 11 years. This friend was the head of police in the region where Pastor Coy was serving the Lord. Coy was allowed to preach freely, organize the church, and train lay pastors without securing the government's permission. Soon there were 800 Christians. The belief in God had such a strong effect on the community that the government noticed and Pastor Coy's friend was removed from office.

Persecution increased both from outside and inside the church. The government offered money to some believers if they would disturb the services and cause problems. Because the people were so poor, some accepted the money. Soon the church had to be closed. The surviving congregation had to move from place to place to try to worship. Pastor Coy was arrested six times, put in jail, and refused any food or water. Government officials hoped they could eliminate Pastor Coy and the church would close. The persecution became worse and worse.

Coy prayed the words of Matthew 10:23: "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes." The oppressed pastor was advised to flee from his country for the safety of his family. It was a miracle that he escaped! Pastor Coy wants the Church to pray for his country and the thousands of Christians there.

Kingdom Vision

October 2001. A Sunday evening. Somewhere. A long taxi ride brought me to the entrance of a fast-food restaurant, the meeting place. Joe met me on time, but we did not have time for fried chicken. We traveled south by car, driven by one of the brothers, a resident of the city.

Some time later in the night, we arrived at an old traditional farmhouse just across a dirt road from a salvage yard and a pig farm—a good location if you want isolation, quiet, and few passersby. We made sure no one was on the road and hurried in through the large metal door. Joe locked the door on the inside. I would not step outside that door for five days, once again under the cover of darkness.

Where were we? An underground Bible college.

Most students were asleep. As I passed by their four-person bunk beds, some stirred, sitting up to offer words of greeting. The love of Christ and obedience to the Great Commission meant that we were family and fellow soldiers in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Who were they? They were 25 courageous Christians representing the house churches of 7 different geographic areas: 22 were pastors, trainers of pastors, and future missionaries. Two helped with our meals, servants to all. One was there to pray for us throughout the week. There were 4 women and 21 men. Three were not yet age 20. Four were the old hands, at least 30 years old. Most were in their 20s.

They were my students for 5 days. Monday through Friday we studied missions. What a joy to study missions with church leaders who have a vision for the Kingdom. Teaching seven 50-minute class sessions each day for five days is a very demanding assignment. I knew that they were willing to multiply my ministry by teaching the material to others upon returning to their homes.

Meal times were fun. The two brothers did very well with the limited cooking facilities. The food was tasty. As we ate together, we relaxed, told jokes, made fun of our various accents, and shared prayer needs.

I was amazed. These 25 adults shared 2 water faucets and one toilet. I never heard a single complaint. As I left on Friday evening, I knew that they would be leaving two at a time after spending 28 days inside. Peter's words to the leaders and followers of the church to "clothe yourselves with humility and be submissive to one another" (1 Peter 5:5, author's paraphrase) became very real to me.

Their churches are growing. However, they humbly confess the inaccurate teaching that plagues their churches. Often at the end of a major section of study, they prayed aloud that they would be able to teach others. They prayed that the church would effectively deal with heresies and false teaching.

During another 5-day missions class, they announced that on the fifth day they would have their very first opportunity to participate in an offering for ministries outside of their homeland. They began to prepare their hearts in prayer for their first offering for missions.

They did not know that the Church of the Nazarene had an ongoing ministry to homeless children in one of the great cities in Brazil, but they asked to make sure the offering would help the needy children in Brazil. The Lord had directed their hearts.

During our last hour together on the last day, we all experienced something new. It was time for the missions offering. We worshiped through singing and prayer. The prayer was very focused on the offering. I realized that this act of worship was a turning point for most in the room.

They passed a small book around. It only took two minutes to receive the offering. What happened at the end of those two minutes was life changing for many people. They counted the offering and we learned that the 40 house-church pastors with an average monthly income of U.S. \$60 had given an average of two weeks' income in their very first offering for missions.

As they counted the cash, they noticed a jewelry box inside the small cardboard "offering plate." Opening the jewelry box, there was an expensive ring and note. As the pastor read the note aloud, he wept. After several emotional minutes, he finally finished reading the note from a man and his wife. The note simply said:

We gave so little in the cash offering. This ring is our best effort to give what is most precious to us. This ring is worth very little in the market place. However, it was my first gift to my fiancé, having fallen in love with her. Thank you for challenging us to give our all in response to the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ. May the Lord use this ring to call others to participate in His mission.

It was time to leave. I prayed for them. They sang a song of blessing. They prayed for my family. We held hands, sang and worshiped. It was dark again. The pastor led me out into the darkness. A few hours later I was in a fine hotel room, repacking for my trip home to the spouse I love.

But I would return to the farmhouse and another group of church leaders. What a joy to study missions with church leaders who have Kingdom vision.

PRESENTATION IDEA: "UNDERCOVER CHRISTIANS"

Prepare and Present

- Conduct the lesson as an interview show. The two guests' identities (Pastor Coy and missions teacher) are kept secret from the audience. Some ways to conceal identities are (1) putting the guests behind a sheet and silhouetting them with a backlight; (2) interviewing them through a phone call; (3) disguising them by dress (coat, hat with large brim, sunglasses or eye mask, etc.).

- Prepare a set of questions for the “host” to ask the guests. Provide the “guests” with copies of the lesson so they can be prepared to answer the questions.
- The more secrecy and suspense, the better. Help the audience to sense they are learning from people who are working with the underground church today.

Options—“A Meeting of the Underground Church”—Conduct the lesson as an underground church service might be conducted. As people enter the church, it is dark with all lights out. Use flashlights for illumination. Use a room to present the lesson where everyone is sitting close together, even some on the floor. Sing songs from memory either without accompaniment or with guitar.

During the service, have two police officers or soldiers enter and arrest the pastor or church leader. They tie his hands behind his back and take him/her away. One of the intruders goes around and confiscates all Bibles.

Make this activity as elaborate or as simple as you want. The more realistic you make it, the more the impact on those who participate. It is a powerful way to show what Christians in the underground church face each week.

“Candlelight Service”—this solemn service remembers those who have been persecuted and martyred for their faith in Christ. Place three large candles on the Communion table or near the front. If possible, give a small candle to everyone who attends. For the service dim the lights and light only the middle candle (representing Jesus, the Light) on the Communion table.

The leader reads John 1:4-8 and continues, “In the same way, the martyrs and those persecuted for their faith give witness to that same eternal light. While they are not that light, they allow that light to shine in the midst of spiritual darkness. As we light candles during this service, let’s remember those who have paid, and are paying, a heavy price for bearing the name of Christ.”

As Pastor Coy’s story is told, light one of the large candles. When the mission teacher’s story is shared, light the other candle. At the end, have the audience come up and light their candles from the Christ candle. These candles represent the people who are being persecuted for their faith. Form a circle around the room and close with prayer.

PRAYER AND INVOLVEMENT TIME

- Pray for those who are persecuted for their faith and are forced to worship in underground churches.
- Pray for Nazarene missionaries and leaders who are serving in creative access areas.
- Fast one meal a week/month and pray for persecuted Christians.
- Sponsor or assist a refugee or refugee family.
- Observe the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church on the second Sunday in November <www.nazarenemissions.org/idop>.