

one
family

ONE SUFFERS. ALL SUFFER.
ONE REJOICES. ALL REJOICE.

BIBLE / PRAYER / STORY
REFLECTION SERIES

OpenDoors
YOUTH



About Open Doors

Millions of people worldwide are persecuted for following Jesus. Open Doors works with Christians on the front line. We are committed to smuggling hope by providing Bibles, training, literacy and livelihood programmes and advocacy support for people who know the true cost of following Jesus.

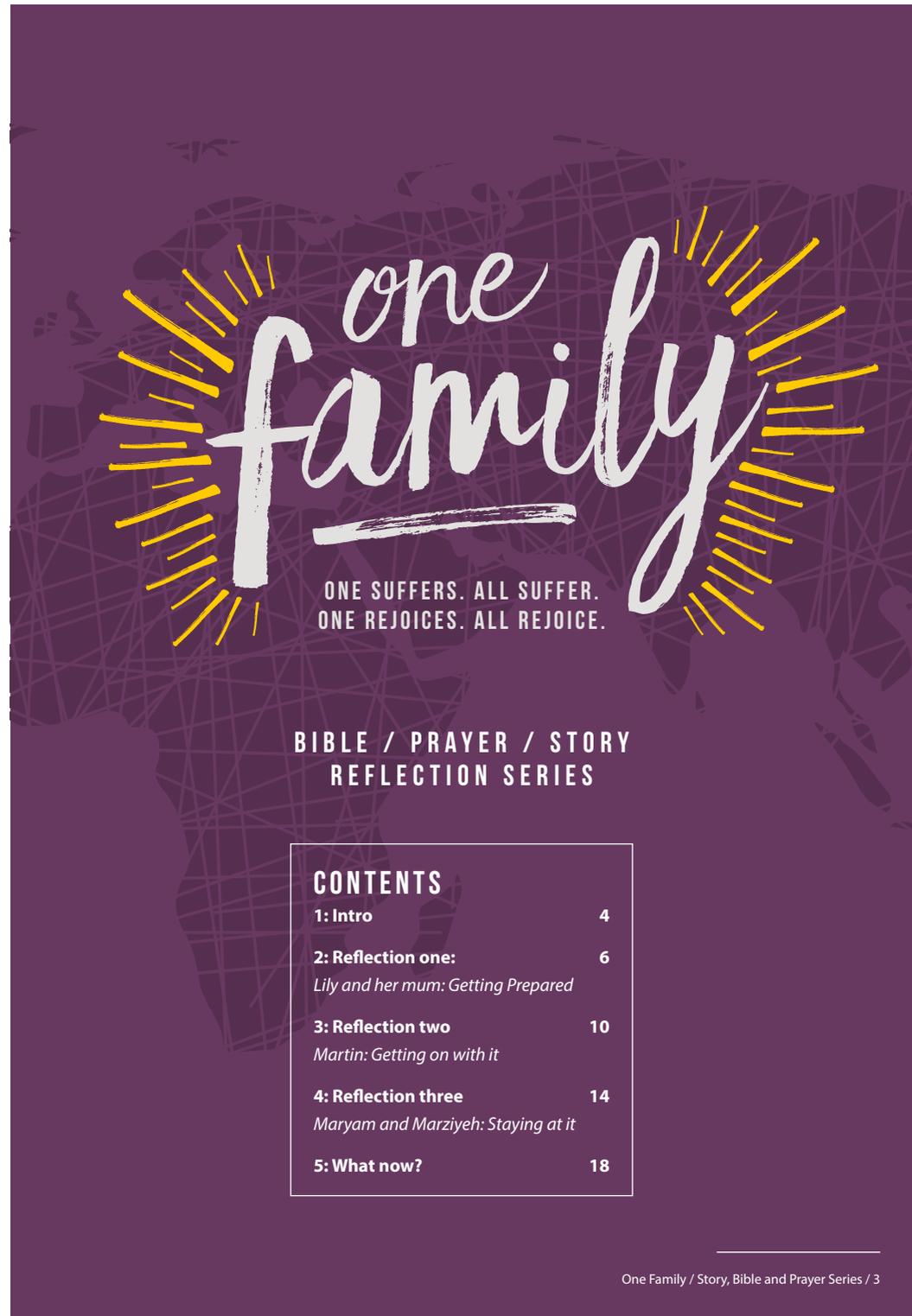
Some stats

Each year we deliver 3.1 million Bibles and Christian materials, provide training for 308,000 Christians facing persecution or discrimination and serve approximately 356,000 people through 897 different community development projects.

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- twitter.com/opendoorsyouth

- youth@opendoorsuk.org
- youtube.com/opendoorsyouth
- instagram/opendoorsyouthuk

Open Doors UK, PO Box 6, Witney, Oxon, OX29 6WG / 01993 460015 / Registered as a Charity in England and Wales No.1125684 and Scotland No. SC043710



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CONTENTS	
1: Intro	4
2: Reflection one: <i>Lily and her mum: Getting Prepared</i>	6
3: Reflection two <i>Martin: Getting on with it</i>	10
4: Reflection three <i>Maryam and Marziyeh: Staying at it</i>	14
5: What now?	18

one family

Family is a tough subject. At best, family is all about love and connection. At worst, it can cause unimaginable pain and hurt. Most of us will know something about both these aspects of family, and everything in between too.

But ultimately, whatever our experiences, families were intended for good. They are supposed to be places of ultimate safety, where we should be loved simply for who we are. Places where no-one is forgotten and everyone is valued.

As Christians we know this definition of family isn't just about who we're biologically connected to, or who we've grown up with. Our church family is about more than that. It's about connection. It's about shared hope, passion and love. As Christians we're joined to millions of others around the world, simply because we make the daily choice to follow Jesus.

That means our church family is made up of millions of people, all very different, but who, because of Jesus, have all glimpsed something of God's love and grace.

In this church family, like the best families we know, no-one should be forgotten. In our worldwide church family no-one should get left out. We're in this together, suffering together, rejoicing together (1 Cor 12:26).

But, and this is a big but, across the world there are many who are silenced, ignored, threatened, intimidated, arrested, targeted and even killed because of their love for Jesus. There are many in our family that are forgotten. There are many that are left out.

Persecution is a daily reality for our worldwide church family. Whether it's Christians in Iraq and Syria fleeing extremism, new converts from North Africa kicked out of home by aggressive relatives, or imprisoned believers in North Korea facing horrendous treatment, many in our family know what it is to suffer for Jesus.

As family, God calls us to care. As Jesus prepared his disciples for what would happen after his death and resurrection, he gave them the following command:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"

John 13:34-35

BECAUSE OF JESUS WE'RE CONNECTED. BECAUSE OF JESUS WE'RE CALLED TO LOVE. BECAUSE OF JESUS WE'RE ONE FAMILY.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

On the following pages you'll find three reflections. These will introduce you to different members of your persecuted family from the Middle East. These people show us a bit of what following Jesus can cost. Their stories are inspiring and challenging. But they are also full of hope, revealing incredible faith in a God who is bigger than any trial or trauma we could ever face. They reveal a God who is worth following no matter what.

The stories aren't long – they should take about 5 minutes to read. But we've also thrown in some Bible passages, links to videos, questions for you to reflect on, and a suggested prayer to pray. Twenty minutes should be enough time for you to get through one session, but do feel free to take longer if you need.

Treat each session like a bit of a mini quiet-time or Bible study series, or just dip into them whenever you can (on the bus, or over a lunch break would work). The key is to give space to reflect and think. Let the stories and words sink in, and then pray.

As you get into these stories, we hope you grow closer to your persecuted family, and are inspired to follow God with all you have.

REFLECTION ONE

getting prepared

LILY AND HER MUM

getting prepared

IMAGINE LIVING IN A PLACE WHERE FOLLOWING JESUS IS CONSIDERED SO WRONG THAT CHRISTIAN CHILDREN ARE TAUGHT TO EXPECT THAT A TIME WILL COME WHEN THEIR PARENTS WILL BE ARRESTED AND TAKEN AWAY. SHOCKING ISN'T IT? BUT WOULD YOU BE ABLE TO COPE IF IT HAPPENED TO YOU? WOULD YOU BE PREPARED?

You would come home from school or college, find the house in a mess and your parents missing. You wouldn't know where they were, why the lap-tops had been taken or why there were books tipped all over the floor. Drawers and wardrobes would be emptied everywhere. There would be signs of a struggle. Things would be broken. It'd be devastating.

In Iran dozens of church leaders are imprisoned indefinitely, simply because they are committed to telling others about Jesus. Christian parents warn their children of what to expect. You see, being a Christian, especially a convert, can lead to arrest, or even death.

Lily's* mum was a housewife, but she was also involved in leading a church.

"We started preparing our daughter Lily for persecution when she was still in primary school. 'Don't worry,' we told her. 'The Bible tells us it is normal to be persecuted as believers. They will take us to prison, ask us some questions, and hit us. Then we will come back.'"*

"It was an early winter morning when the authorities came. Lily was 12 at the time and

had already left for school. They searched everything. Then they ordered my husband and me to come with them.

"I insisted that I call my sister before coming with them. How could they let a 12-year-old come home to an empty house – a house she didn't even have a key to? Reluctantly, they let me call.

"I knew what Lily would do when she was picked up from school by my sister – she would pray for us. And when she was afraid, she would pray more. She would also call a friend in our ministry like we had instructed her to do. This friend had promised to take care of Lily while we were in prison."

"In prison, my husband and I were split up. I was allowed to call Lily four times a week. I was interrogated daily. Soon they found my weak point: my little girl. I told them everything they wanted to know about myself, but I refused to give the names of others. 'Okay,' they told me, 'as long as you won't give names, you can't call your daughter.' I was devastated. Back in my cell, I couldn't stop crying."



"I couldn't sleep that night. On top of everything it was freezing cold. It was mid-winter with no heating and the windows of my little cell were broken. But while I was praying, all of the sudden I felt a warm wind stroking my cheeks. 'Take it in,' I heard the Lord saying.

"With every breath of warm air I took, I felt my body being filled with joy. I had to dance for joy and praise God. All night I was dancing for the Lord. I had the strength to put my beloved daughter in the hands of God."

"Not long afterwards I was released, as was my husband. I learned that on that cold night in prison, my fellow believers had been praying for me to receive peace and joy. I saw His light most clearly in the darkest of circumstances. He cared for me and he was working in me. He still does, I feel this very clearly every single day.

"I was very happy to see my little Lily again. She told me that she had been praying a lot for us. Spending these times in prayer and trusting the Lord in everything was a

completely new experience for her. Looking back, she says that she never grew more in her faith than during that time we were in prison. I gave my Lilly into the hands of the Lord, and He had taken care of her."

There's so much in this story. There's the fact that Lily and her parents knew following Jesus would cost them. Then there's the fact that they were prepared to endure suffering and being split apart as a family because of Jesus. Then there's the commitment – and amazing answers – to prayer.

For Lily and her mum, the times when they could have felt that following Jesus was ruining their lives were the times they chose to dig in, to depend ever more on Him and to pray. They were prepared. They knew Jesus was worth more than even the most precious relationships they had. Lily's mum said: *'I see his light most clearly in the darkest of circumstances.'*

The challenge for us in the west isn't prison. We're not likely to be arrested, or executed, for choosing to follow Jesus. But Lily and her mum show us that following Jesus costs, and being prepared to follow Him means putting God above everything else – even the things we love most dearly. It's about heart. It's about truly knowing He is worth more, and being prepared to give it all for Him. We may never have to give up the things we dearly love for God – He is a loving Father after all – but we need to get our hearts in the right place, seeing Him as the most precious thing we could ever know.



BIBLE

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

Psalm 23:5

Read all of Psalm 23

be prepared to give everything up for God. How does that make you feel? Worried, scared, excited?

REFLECT

- ❓ What challenges you about the story of Lily and her mum? What stands out?
- ❓ Lily was the most precious thing in her mum's life. But when she gave her daughter fully into God's care, then He took care of both of them. When we put God first there will be a cost, but He is good and loving, and totally worth it. Think about the relationships and things in your life that are precious to you. Could you actively put God before them? What would happen if you did?
- ❓ Read the Psalm. It's pretty famous. The first few verses depict good times. The second lot highlight bad. But through it all the writer knows God's love, power and strength. Pray you'd have the same constant attitude to God.
- ❓ Lily knew to depend on God even when her mum was taken away. She was prepared because she had put God above everything else in her life. If we want to have the same attitude as Lily and her mum we need to

PRAY

Father

Thank you for my family around the world. Thank you for people like Lily and her mum who have stuck with You no matter what they faced. Thank you too that in the rough times they knew Your goodness, love and provision. I pray for many like them, for families pulled apart because of persecution. Be with mums and dads in prison. Be with the children waiting for their parents to be released. Give them strength, courage, protection and hope.

Holy Spirit help me be prepared. Help me see that there is nothing as precious as knowing You. Help me know Your love in incredibly real and tangible ways. Help me depend on You above all else, no matter what the cost, what others think, or where You will lead. Even though these words make me a bit scared and nervous, I know You are loving and good. Help me always know that.

Amen.

REFLECTION TWO

getting on with it

MARTIN

getting on with it

MARTIN IS A YOUNG CHURCH LEADER FROM A TOWN CALLED KARAMLES WHICH IS NEAR MOSUL, IN IRAQ. HE'S KNOWN WAR MOST OF HIS LIFE, BUT IN 2014 THINGS TOOK A DISTINCT TURN FOR THE WORSE. HE WAS JUST 24, STILL TO FINISH HIS TRAINING WHEN THE EXTREMIST MUSLIM GROUP, THE SO-CALLED ISLAMIC STATE, TOOK CONTROL OF LARGE PARTS OF HIS COUNTRY. THEN THEY CAME TO HIS VILLAGE.

On that one night, Martin left with the majority of people from his town. They'd been warned by the army to go. Christians and other minorities were being treated horrendously. At best they would be forced to leave homes, at worst, they faced violence, punishment and death.

The night he fled he managed to scramble together a few possessions including his phone. He, along with the others from Karamles, headed to Erbil, a safer city in Northern Iraq. Initially they found shelter in a half-built shopping centre. As the war intensified the people building the new mall pulled out of the project. This empty shell of a building became home to several hundred families.

Life wasn't easy. To begin with they built temporary rooms and shared kitchens. But it wasn't home. They wanted to go home:

"I want to go back to my village, to rebuild it again. I want to live like a citizen in my country. I'm an Iraqi. We cannot divide the Iraqi people between Muslim, Christian, Shia or Sunni. We have to live in our country. We love our country, but there's no place to

include us. They treat us like refugees, they persecuted us, and we didn't do anything. We want to live here. But we want to live like a citizen."

But that's not it. Martin hasn't just stopped. In fact, he's persevering, getting on with it, keeping going despite the pain, heartache and troubles. And he's chosen to stay in Iraq. Home for him isn't simply a place. He knows his true home and security can only be found in God.

"We don't hear much about Karamles because it is still occupied by Islamic State. We have our prayers and services in exactly the same way as we did in Karamles. So in this way we remember our church and village. Of course, I desire to go back to my church, the place I grew up in. But if I'm called to serve in the desert, I can still serve there. From sand I can make a church".

Martin has embraced his circumstances and is simply getting on with it. Yes, it's hard, and yes, he'd love the situation to change, but he knows God's calling Him to serve and show love to those around him – no matter where he finds himself or whatever the circumstances.



So often we wait for the 'right time' or when 'we're qualified' to think we can be used properly by God. Martin experienced massive tragedy, he hadn't yet finished his training as a leader and had no church in which to gather people, but he got on with it, and still is. If we think we're too young, too inexperienced or don't have the right training to be used by God now, Martin's example shows us otherwise. Sometimes we just need to get on with it.

"This continuing situation has just solidified my calling. I am needed here at this moment to feed my people with charity and with hope. They know that my family isn't here and that I could choose to emigrate to be with my family. I could go to the USA and live a rich and peaceful life. But despite the situation I have decided to follow my calling and stay in Iraq, with them. That gives them hope."

Sometimes we just need to get on with it. Sometimes following God is hard. The situations we face are tough and we're not sure if we can do it. We think we're not ready, or the issues are too big. But God calls us forward. Like Martin he wants us to find our security and home in Him. And when we do that we can realise that we can serve God wherever we find ourselves and whatever we face.

BIBLE

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Acts 2: 24

Read Acts 2: 1-40

WATCH

Watch some videos of Martin. Head to [youtube.com/pendoorsyouth](https://www.youtube.com/pendoorsyouth) and check out the Iraq video diaries to meet Martin yourself.



THINK

? Martin isn't a super human. He's not much different to you. He worries, has fears and is dealing with some big struggles. But he's still choosing to serve. Are there situations you face that stop you from showing God's love to others? What are they?

? Many of us wait until we think we're ready for God to use us, but Martin shows us God doesn't need us to be fully qualified or experienced to be used by Him. Are you waiting for something to happen before you think God can really use you?

? Read the Bible passage. What's this got to do with getting on with it? The disciples were not trained religious leaders. They weren't from good families. A few were fishermen. One was a tax collector. Their training was from a rogue rabbi called Jesus, and he'd recently been killed. They were scared, not sure how they could serve God, or if they were even qualified to in the first place. Then the Holy Spirit comes and their lives are turned upside down. They preach with authority. They speak in strange languages. Miracles happen. And thousands come to know Jesus. Incredible. Ask God that His Holy Spirit would inspire you in the same way as the early disciples.

? Unlike Martin, we probably won't have to give up everything we know because of our faith. We might not face the extreme

situations that Martin has encountered. But God is still looking to use us, wherever we are or whatever we face. How can God use you to bring His love and light to the people you meet and hang out with every day? What people or places in your life is God putting on your heart? What can you do about it?

PRAY

Father,

Thank you for Martin and all those across Iraq and Syria who are serving You despite war and terror. I pray You would use them to spread hope, love, peace and reconciliation. Protect them and the people they serve, and give them boldness and courage to keep sharing Your love.

Father, send Your Holy Spirit to be with me. Inspire and empower me to see how You can use me, even when I think I'm not ready or when I face challenges that seem too big for me to overcome. I'm sorry when I give up and give in. Help me get on with it and keep going. Help me know deep down that my security and home is in You, and that You will never leave me. Use me where I am, with what I have. I'm ready.

Amen.

REFLECTION THREE

sticking at it

MARYAM AND MARZIEH

sticking at it

MARYAM AND MARZIEH ARE FROM IRAN. BEING CHRISTIANS THEY HAD TO BE CAREFUL. IN IRAN FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ARE SECOND CLASS CITIZENS. ISLAM IS THE OFFICIAL RELIGION, AND THE COUNTRY'S GOVERNMENT IS BASED ON ISLAMIC LAW. MANY MUSLIMS WON'T EVEN TOUCH CHRISTIANS OR EAT FOOD WITH THEM. YOU COULD BE ARRESTED SIMPLY FOR TALKING TO NON-CHRISTIANS ABOUT JESUS.

And that is what makes Maryam and Marziyeh's story incredible. They were young – in their mid-twenties. But they were passionate about sharing God's love. They decided the best way to do this would be to give out Bibles.

So, they would fill a back-pack with copies of God's Word. Then they would pray, asking Jesus where they should distribute them. Then, under the cover of darkness, they would travel around the city placing the Bibles into people's letterboxes. They estimate that they gave away 20,000 Bibles across Tehran (the capital of Iran) in this way.

By the time they were caught, they were wanted criminals. They were put in Evin prison, one of the most notorious prisons on the planet. They had friends in the prison that were abused, tortured, beaten, and even killed.

Almost on a weekly basis the girls would be brought before a judge. He would give them an opportunity to be free. He wanted them to write one sentence – one sentence that would say that they had denied their Christian faith and converted to Islam.

Each time Maryam and Marziyeh refused. And each time the judge would grow more and more frustrated. He'd say 'You don't understand. Unless you convert, you will die here.' They replied 'No you don't understand. We're not afraid to die... What we're afraid of is a life without faith - a life without our saviour Jesus Christ.'

Incredible.

After 249 days, and a global campaign pressuring the Iranian government to free them, Maryam and Marziyeh were released. Amazing.

But for many, the situation doesn't end happily. Many who are imprisoned across the Middle East for their faith in Jesus will not be released. Many will continue to be interrogated. Many will be mistreated. Some will die.

This is the reality. And that is the reality that Maryam and Marziyeh faced. They didn't know they would be freed. They were given an easy way out of prison – a prison they weren't sure they would ever leave. But, they chose to stay with Jesus no matter what the cost. They stuck with it. That is true faithfulness.



As with many stories from Christians who are persecuted for their faith, this challenges the core of our faith. Have a think.

Do we expect God to rescue us when life goes wrong?

Do we expect that He would come and bring us to safety every time we feel uncomfortable or face tough times?

Do we only consider that God is 'faithful' to us when we get what we really want?

These are tough questions. But Maryam and Marziyeh challenge us to think differently about our faith. Faced with death, they had such a passion for Jesus that nothing else mattered – not even their personal safety. They had faith when everything else had been taken away.

So often we think it's God's job to be faithful to us – and by that we mean that He should rescue us when life goes wrong. And sometimes He does. But Maryam and Marziyeh challenge us to realise that when things turn bad in our lives, sometimes it's up to us to remain faithful to God.

Because He is forever faithful.

BIBLE

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22-23

THINK

- 1. How does your walk with Jesus get affected when life gets tough?
- 2. What comes to mind when you think of God's faithfulness?
- 3. How does the story of Maryam and Marziyeh challenge you?
- 4. Read the passage above. Look it up in your Bible. Read what comes before. The writer is not in a good place. He has to remind himself of God's love. Often we struggle to look beyond our circumstances to see God's love and beauty. Ask God would help you to see Him more clearly.
- 5. Spend some time remembering when God answered your prayers or you felt close to Him. Thank him for those times.
- 6. Ask God to help you remain faithful when trouble or tough times come.



NO YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. WE'RE NOT AFRAID TO DIE... WHAT WE'RE AFRAID OF IS A LIFE WITHOUT FAITH - A LIFE WITHOUT OUR SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST.

PRAY

Father,

Thank you that You are faithful no matter what. Help me understand that You love me even when life turns rough. Help me to stick with You no matter what I face. Thank you for the example of Maryam and Marziyeh – and that they were freed. I pray for all those currently in prison because they have chosen You. Be with them, give them strength, courage, hope and peace. Help them know Your love deeply. I pray for their freedom, but even more I pray that their faithfulness to you would inspire many, including those who imprisoned them.

Thank you that You are a God of grace and love, and no matter how far I go, You are there for me. Help me share Your love with the same passion and boldness as Maryam and Marziyeh. Holy Spirit, be with me today and help me know Your love more and more.

Amen.

THE NEXT STEPS

what now?

what now?

BEEN INSPIRED BY THE STORIES, BIBLE PASSAGES AND PRAYERS? DON'T STOP NOW. KEEP GOING! THERE ARE LOADS OF THINGS YOU CAN DO TO CONTINUE A JOURNEY WITH YOUR PERSECUTED FAMILY – TRY ONE OF THESE:

1. KEEP PRAYING

Follow us on Twitter and Instagram or like us on Facebook to get daily prayer updates, stories and articles to help you connect with your persecuted family.

2. RAISE MONEY

Check out our website, www.opendoorsyouth.org, for loads of ways that you can raise money for Christians facing persecution. There's our annual sponsored social media fast, Blackout, as well as simple ideas for groups too.

3. SPEAK UP AND SHARE

We run regular campaigns, petitions and ways to help you use your voice and freedom to speak up for those that are persecuted for following Jesus.

Check out www.opendoorsyouth.org for the latest campaigns, and make sure you like and share our social media updates to spread the word!

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