



PRAYER ALERT...

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BRITISH ISLES & IRELAND

■ ‘Bear the load together’ says Archbishop

The Archbishop of Canterbury has used his Christmas sermon to call on rich and poor alike to share in the hardships brought on by the financial crisis and cuts in public spending. Reflecting on the mutual dependence of humans, Dr Rowan Williams urged people not to give in to the temptation of abandoning others to suffering, whilst they secure their own safety. ‘Faced with the hardship that quite clearly lies ahead for so many in the wake of the financial crisis and public spending cuts, how far are we able to sustain a living sense of loyalty to each other, a real willingness to bear the load together?’ he said. ‘How eager are we to find some spot where we feel safe from the pressures that are crippling and terrifying others? ‘As has more than once been said, we can and will as a society bear hardship if we are confident that it is being fairly shared.’

Pray: for a sense of fairness and justice throughout all levels of our society as we face financial cutbacks. (Am.5:24)

More: <http://www.christiantoday.co.uk/article/archbishop.calls.on.nation.to.bear.the.load.together/27289.htm>

■ Legal system discriminates against Christians

The Bishop of Winchester, the Rt Rev Michael Scott-Joynt, warned that the death of ‘religious literacy’ among those who made and administered the law had created an imbalance in the way in which those with faith were treated compared to sexual minorities. Highlighting the case of Gary McFarlane, a relationship counsellor who was sacked by Relate for refusing to give sex therapy to a homosexual couple, he said that the judiciary now went out of its way to protect the rights of minorities. At the same time, for the first time in British history politicians and judges were largely ignorant of religion and so failed to appreciate the importance Christians placed on abiding by the scriptures rather than the politically correct values of the secular state. The Bishop’s concerns were underlined by Lord Woolf, a former Lord Chief Justice, who agreed that in some legal cases the balance had gone ‘too far’ in tipping away from Christians.

Pray: that lawmakers and enforcers will ensure that fairness and balance between political correctness and Christian beliefs will be restored. (Pr.16:11)

More: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/8225991/Bishop-of-Winchester-legal-system-discriminates-against-Christians.html>

■ Human rights and Christian values

Christian assemblies in schools could be scrapped if campaigning atheists and teachers get their way. According to the National Secular Society, a legal requirement for pupils to take part in a daily act of collective worship ‘of a broadly Christian character’ discriminates against young atheists and non-Christians, and infringes human rights. The Association of School and College Leaders has also suggested assemblies should end, and the British Humanist Association is campaigning on the subject. But the most direct attack on religious assemblies, which represents yet another assault on Britain’s historic Christian values, has come in a letter to Education Secretary Michael Gove from Keith Porteous, executive director of the

National Secular Society. This week, former Lord Chief Justice Lord Woolf joined the Bishop of Winchester in saying the Bench had gone 'too far' in curbing the rights of Christians to demonstrate their faith at work. (See story above)

Pray: that human rights would not be used to attack this nation's Christian values. (2Ch.20:12)

More: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1341985/Call-ban-school-assemblies-secularists-claim-Christian-character-infringes-childrens-human-rights.html>

■ Education report debunks secular neutrality myth

Secularism isn't a neutral force in education and it attempts to exclude faith from the classroom risk of anti-religious indoctrination, according to a new report by a professor of education. Prof Trevor Cooling's report, entitled *Doing God in Education*, also criticised opponents who claim that faith schools shouldn't be able to consider religious criteria when selecting pupils. The report, published by the theology think-tank Theos, argues that all education is value driven and shaped by school leaders. It cautions: 'The objection to so-called neutral approaches, then, is that they privilege secular worldviews and are in danger of implicit anti-religious indoctrination. 'They are not, in other words, neutral.' Commenting on the report Paul Woolley, the think-tank's director, said: 'The idea that education is religiously neutral or objective is indefensible. 'Teaching is shaped by our understanding of which virtues we should practise, what qualities we should value, ultimately of what kind of people we should be.'

Pray: for the value of good religious education to be recognised and its place in the school curriculum to be ensured. (Ti.1:13)

More: <http://www.christian.org.uk/news/education-report-debunks-secular-neutrality-myth/>

■ Only half of Britons say UK is Christian

Only half of British adults are confident that Britain can now be described as 'a Christian country', according to research. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, has written to David Cameron urging him to review laws that have seen Christians forced to abandon their faith in public. He warned that reforms introduced under Labour promoted 'tolerance, equality and fairness' at a cost of eroding Christianity as the foundation of British culture and society. The warnings follow a series of court cases in which the beliefs of Christians have come into conflict with the state authorities. In the letter to the Prime Minister, Lord Carey said Christians were too often 'ridiculed' and dismissed as relics of 'a bygone age'. 'Notwithstanding its vast and varied contribution to our society, there appears to be a suspicion about the validity and value of the role that the Christian faith plays in our national life,' he said.

Pray: for the Church to take up the challenge to be the light in the darkness. (1Th.5:5)

More: <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/2010/12/27/only-half-of-britons-say-uk-is-a-christian-country/>

■ Joseph as ideal male role model

Jesus and Mary are usually the centre of attention at the school Nativity play, but Iain Duncan Smith says society – and the church – would do well to pay more attention to Joseph. Writing in the Daily Mail last week, the Tory MP said Joseph was the 'forgotten hero' of the story of Christ's birth. The example set by Joseph in standing by Mary and Jesus offered, he said, a 'very clear message for our own time' in which generations of young people are growing up without fathers. Mr Duncan Smith said society seemed to have forgotten the important role played by fathers, from providing shelter and placing food on the table, to nurturing and supporting their children. 'It's about providing the best male role model that a man can have,' he said. Mr Duncan Smith pointed to the link between fatherlessness and family breakdown, high levels of truancy, anti-social behaviour, youth crime, street gangs and teenage pregnancy.

Pray: for all fathers to recognise their responsibility to be a good role model for their sons. (Pr.1:8)

More: <http://www.christiantoday.co.uk/article/iain.duncan.smith.points.to.joseph.as.ideal.male.role.model/27283.htm>

■ Anti-Semitism on rise at British universities

Britain's Chief Rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks, has charged several of the UK's most prestigious universities of 'turning a blind eye and a deaf ear' to the increasing number of speeches defaming and delegitimizing Israel being made on campuses all over Britain. He contrasted the conduct of universities with government officials of all political parties who take 'an unequivocal and a firm stand against anti-Semitism.' 'Let me be blunt,' Sacks said. 'I believe that the inflammatory public speeches being allowed to take place on university campuses would, in any other context and directed against any other group, be prosecuted under the law forbidding incitement to racial and possibly religious hatred.'

Pray: against this trend in our education establishments by those whose values are distorted. (Pr.16:13)

More: http://www.icej.org/article/anti_semitism_on_rise_at_british_universities

EUROPE

■ Rome: Pope denounces attacks in Nigeria, Philippines

Pope Benedict XVI deplored on Sunday the 'absurd violence' against Christians after attacks on churches in Nigeria and the Philippines over the Christmas holiday. 'It was with great sadness that I learnt about the attack on a Catholic Church in the Philippines during the celebrations for Christmas and also against Christian churches in Nigeria,' the Pope said. 'The earth is once again stained with blood as we have seen in other parts of the world,' Benedict added in his Angelus address at The Vatican, as he offered his condolences to the victims of the 'absurd violence'.

Pray: for the protection of believers across the world as they face violence and attacks on their faith. (2Tim.4:18)

More: http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gpn2I1BB_h8zNXIY2GIFXeYD9ndA?docId=CNG.78e0d6ea454a7aaf3314a8dbd2c58027.601

■ **Denmark: 'Muhammad cartoon plotters' held**

Five men have been arrested in Denmark and Sweden for planning to attack a newspaper that published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, police say. Security officials said four suspects - including three Swedish residents - were held in Denmark, and another was detained in Sweden. Danish media reported that a pistol fitted with a silencer was found on the group held in Denmark. Publication of the Muhammad cartoons in 2005 outraged Muslims worldwide. Security officials said the four men held in Denmark had been planning to enter the building housing the Jyllands-Posten - the newspaper that originally published the cartoons. They had wanted 'to kill as many of the people present as possible', according to Jakob Scharf, the head of Denmark's intelligence and security agency, Pet. He said an 'imminent Mumbai-type terror attack' had been foiled and described some of the suspects as 'militant Islamists'.

Pray: against militant activists everywhere that continue to promote their evil ideas at every opportunity. (Ps.36:3-4)

More: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12089543>

WORLDWIDE

■ **Nigeria: Christmas violence death toll rises to 80**

The death toll for the Christmas Eve bombings in central Nigeria and the Christian-Muslim clash that ensued has risen to at least 80 people. Police initially said 32 people were killed in the coordinated bomb explosions in Jos on Christmas Eve. The latest death toll includes those killed in the connected conflict between Muslim and Christian youths on Sunday in central Nigeria. Another 100 people were wounded and are in the hospital. On Christmas Eve, two bombs exploded near a busy market where people were Christmas shopping in Jos, the capital of Plateau state. Another blast occurred in a predominantly Christian neighbourhood and a fourth bomb exploded near a road leading to the main mosque in Jos. Sectarian violence is nothing new to residents of Jos, who earlier this year endured a massacre that left more than 500 people dead. Jos lies in the middle of Nigeria, where the Muslim north meets the mainly Christian south.

Pray: for the people of Nigeria that God would break through and bring peace to this divided nation. And for grace and wisdom for Archbishop Ben Kwashi as a peacemaker. (Mt.12:25)

More: <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/nigeria.christmas.violence.death.toll.rises.to.80/27298.htm>

■ **Philippines: Bombing wounds 11 at Christmas Mass**

A bomb exploded during Christmas Day Mass at a chapel inside a police camp in the volatile southern Philippines, wounding a priest and 10 churchgoers. The device was hidden in a ventilation window near the ceiling of the chapel, which is on the compound where the provincial police office is located in Jolo town on Jolo Island, Sulu provincial police said. The island is a stronghold of al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf militants, but it wasn't clear who was responsible for the bombing. Investigators recovered parts of a cell phone they believe detonated the device. All of the wounded were civilians. One woman remained at a hospital for observation on Saturday, but police said one did not need hospital treatment and the others had been treated and sent home. The Philippines is predominantly Catholic, but Christians are a minority on Jolo and nearby island provinces that are majority Muslim.

Pray: that God would intervene and bring His peace and unity to the people of Jolo and Mindanao. (1Sa.10:6)

More: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/dec/25/bombing-wounds-11-christmas-mass-philippines/>

■ **Gaza: War 'only a question of time'**

A senior Israeli army officer has told the BBC that as long as Hamas remains in control of the Gaza Strip, another war is 'only a question of time'. He said the Palestinian Islamist group had re-armed so much since the Israeli offensive two years ago that it was now in a stronger position militarily. There has been an increase in rocket fire coming from Gaza in the past week. Earlier, Israeli defence officials said tanks fitted with a new missile defence system would be deployed near Gaza. The UN has condemned the firing of 'indiscriminate' rocket and mortar attacks by militants in Gaza in recent weeks. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat also warned that tensions were escalating in the region, and that any Israeli attack on Gaza would only lead to further bloodshed. 'Military solutions such as these won't achieve anything and will only complicate the situation,' Mr Erekat said.

Pray: for a speedy resolution to the Gaza situation and against any new conflict. (Pr.6:4)

More: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12064775>

■ **Algeria: Christians appeal against prison sentence**

Four Christian men of a small Protestant church in Algeria are appealing against a court decision to hand them suspended prison sentences for worshiping without a state permission. News of the appeal comes after a court on December 12 reduced the sentences of Abdenour Raid, Nacer Mokrani and Idir Haoudj - to two months. The fourth man, Reverend Mahmoud Yahou, was sentenced to three months in jail and a 1,000-dinar fine (US\$ 132). The prosecutor had asked for one-year prison sentences for each defendant. Defence lawyer Mohamed Benbelkacem said the men were found guilty of 'clandestinely housing a pastor' who was to hold a conference in their village of Ait Atteli. The Christians said they want to appeal against the sentence to avoid a government crackdown on other churches. The verdict was the latest in a series of cases targeting converted Christians in the country.

Pray: that the authorities would reconsider and scrap these unjust sentences. (Is.10:1)

More: <http://www.bosnewsline.com/14856-algerian-christians-appeal-against-prison-sentence>

■ **Pakistan: Cleric offers thousands for killing Christian**

Muslims began protests on Friday, December 24, against plans to change Pakistan's blasphemy laws, after an Islamic leader offered nearly \$6,000 for the killing of a Christian woman he accused of offending Islam. Tensions have risen over a

government ministry's recommendation to release Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy. The case has sped up a government investigation whether to change the blasphemy laws, which has led to the sentencing of Christians throughout the country. Friday's protests were encouraged by Pakistani cleric Moulana Yousaf Qureshi who announced a financial award for anyone killing Bibi. 'I will pay 500,000 rupees (\$6,000) for the loyal follower of Muhammad who beheads Asia Bibi,' he told a crowd of several hundred people earlier this month. The amount is more than six times the country's average annual wage. (See Prayer Alert 4910)

Pray: that Asia Bibi would gain her full freedom in safety - and the proposed changes to the blasphemy laws would be successful. (1Pet.2:16)

More: <http://www.worthynews.com/9851-muslim-protests-as-cleric-offers-thousands-for-killing-christian>

■ China: Police raid Christmas Eve service

Police raided a house church Christmas Eve service in the south-western city of Chengdu on Friday night, taking into custody 17 believers, including one pregnant woman, sources told ChinaAid. Wang Yi, an elder of the Autumn Rain Church in Chengdu, Sichuan province, was taken to the local Caoshi Road police station, while the other brothers and sisters, as well as one non-Christian 'seeker,' were interrogated inside a police vehicle belonging to the Jinjiang sub-bureau. ChinaAid Association condemns the Chengdu authorities for their illegal raid on the Autumn Rain Church and for the totally superfluous act of taking church members into custody. It expresses its great respect to Wang, the other believers and the non-Christian 'seeker'. By suffering persecution for the sake of your faith on Christmas Eve, you have truly lived out the real meaning of Christmas.

Pray: for the Church as it faces ongoing challenges against meeting together. (Heb.10:25)

More: http://www.openheaven.com/forums/forum_posts.asp?TID=35091&PN=1&TPN=1

■ Bangladesh: Rebel group prevents Christmas Worship

One of the two main political parties of the indigenous people in Bangladesh's south-eastern hill tracts prevented Christians from celebrating Christmas, sources said. The United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), which has demanded that Christian converts return to Buddhism, threatened tribal Christians of at least seven churches in Khagrachari district, some 300 kilometers (180 miles) southeast of the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka. A source requesting anonymity said that a local leader of the UPDF, a regional party seeking autonomy, warned Christians not to hold a Christmas gathering. 'Members of the Kalapani Bethlehem Church could not celebrate Christmas this year,' the source said. 'UPDF members threatened them, saying 'You cannot play the harmonium, drums and sing here. You cannot even worship silently'. Christian elders told the UPDF leader by telephone that they had arranged food for around 100 people, and the UPDF members allowed them only to eat their rice and curry.

Pray: as further attacks occur on Churches gathering, that God would protect His saints and open the doors for worship. (Ps.20:6)

More: <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/bangladesh/30238/>

PRAISE REPORTS

■ Christians leaders pray for the nation

Christian leaders from a wide variety of denominations, ministries and prayer networks gathered earlier this month at New Life Christian Centre in Wembley to unite together and mobilize the church to fast and pray for the nation throughout 2011. 'We were delighted to see 60-70 leaders from around the nation and there was an excellent response from those who were present,' said Ian Christiansen Senior Minister of New Life Christian Centre. He added: 'We heard from Anglican minister Keith Powell from the West Country who shared how God has spoken to him about 2011 being a pivotal year for fasting and praying.' Global Day of Prayer London Convener Jonathan Oloyede said 'This is the time for leaders to lay down their titles, brands and denominational labels and unite together at the cross in prayer. If we can truly covenant together in unity we will see restoration, renewal and revival in our generation.'

Praise: God for His call to unity and prayer. May we all be obedient and answer that call. (Eph.4:13)

More: <http://www.assistnews.net/STORIES/2010/s10120094.htm>

■ Record number visit Bethlehem

The little town of Bethlehem has seen the highest number of Christmas pilgrims in a decade, according to the Israeli military. More than 100,000 people from around the world gathered in the birthplace of Jesus this Christmas, up from 50,000 the previous year. The increase in tourists is most likely down to a decrease in violence between Palestinians and Israel in recent years. Included among the pilgrims are about 500 Christians from Gaza Strip who were granted a rare holiday entry permit by Israel. There are about 3,500 Christians among Gaza's 1.5 million population. Palestinian officials said all 24 of Bethlehem's hotels were fully booked. The Middle East's senior Catholic cleric Fuad Twal travelled to Bethlehem from Jerusalem and held a midnight mass at St Catherine's Church, next to the Church of the Nativity. Twal called for peace and reconciliation between Israel and Palestinians.

Praise: God for this increased number of pilgrims gathering to worship at the stable. (Lk.2:15)

More: <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/record.number.of.pilgrims.visit.bethlehem.this.christmas/27294.htm>

PRAYER FORUM OF THE BRITISH ISLES & IRELAND

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