**Addressing Persecution in Movements**

A local movement leader whom I was mentoring planned to meet one of the leaders he mentored. Together they would visit a majority religious institution that had invited them to share about Jesus.  
  
My friend was delayed because of a traffic jam. In his absence, the eager young man had already left for their appointment. We later learned that a trap had been set on a lonely stretch of road; the invitation to share was to lure him into the trap. A group of radicals stopped the young man and surrounded him. They beat him with a hammer until nearly dead, then burned him to death. We confirmed his death and his identity through a photo sent by a believing police officer. This was the first time our movement experienced a death because of persecution. Many more would follow in subsequent years.

This event years ago surfaced numerous questions and issues of leadership that arise when religious persecution occurs. Over time, some of our answers became clearer as we faced increased and more varied persecution. In many cases where we have confirmed a death of a leader in our movement, local leaders believe (based on the clothing of the killers or location of the killing) it was religious persecution made to look like the result of a robbery or traffic accident. In other cases, leaders have simply disappeared. So we have learned the need to evaluate each case individually.

Following are 11 questions we have found helpful in handling cases of violent persecution.

**1. Have we unnecessarily put people in harm's way?**

After this brother’s death, I spent time with the Lord in prayer and meditating on Scripture. In my time of sorrow, the Lord reminded me of a clear biblical truth. Persecution and suffering are a normal part of the advance of the gospel (2 Timothy 3:12). In Mark’s Gospel (Mark 8:34–35) we see that the suffering of the cross is not only the way of our Saviour but also the way of his followers. Jesus reinterpreted honor in God’s kingdom. To gain life we must lose.

I also reflected on the truth that God never sleeps or slumbers. He knew this tragedy would occur and he allowed it. God's love is perfect – a better love than our love for our friends. If the God who loves perfectly allows his children to suffer, who are we to question him? He is LORD. Like Job, we may ask, “Why?” But God answers with, “*Who?*” Suffice it to know that our Father is all-powerful and all-loving, and his power and love work together for his children’s good and his glory. At the same time, we can find ways to reduce risk without reducing evangelism or boldness.

**2. To what outside advisor(s) should I go for advice?**

It seemed wise to seek advice outside the circle of leaders in our movement, who had been emotionally jarred by the murder. I realized that our own organizational leaders might not be the best advisors during a crisis of this kind, so I reached out to my network of movement leaders in other countries. Several people answered with words of emotional support, but I did not find much help from these sources. I needed concrete advice for making many decisions, not merely comfort. Only one man sent me concrete advice, listing six items. I worked these through my grid, which helped us develop an action plan.  
  
**3. Should we evacuate surviving people close to the one killed?**

In Scripture we find that sometimes the answer was “yes.” Paul and others were evacuated on occasion. We also find in Scripture that sometimes the answer was “no.” Suffering believers sometimes stayed put, confident God would protect them.

Since Scripture does not give us blanket answers about evacuation, we need wisdom to guide in each case. In our situation, we decided that we needed to evacuate two of the people closest to the martyr. Their names were also on a list of those to be killed by the radicals. We evacuated both of them – a young man and a mentor of the martyr – to distant areas where they could stay with and be provided for by relatives. The mentor was badly shaken by the death and fearful, which also factored into our decision to evacuate him. His wife was discovered to have cancer at that time, and the relatives cared for her as she passed away.

This latter man’s brother was also a mentor of the martyr. However, this brother was not badly shaken emotionally. He wanted to stay to follow up with the small groups who had been left without their leader. We listened to his desire and to other leaders closest to the problem, and we did not evacuate him. He demonstrated the discipline and dedication of a soldier under fire. He showed shrewdness and courage combined with wisdom. He was active but also cautious. He had a shepherd's heart for the four groups that had been left without their leader.

In persecution cases that have not resulted in death or carried an imminent threat to life, our starting point has been to recommend believers stay and get help in negotiating reduced tensions.  
  
**4. Should we claim the body? Should we demand justice toward those who had killed him?**

We reached out to believing policemen who could give us information about the murder investigation without exposing us. An informant inside the police department reported that a radical group trained outside the country had killed our leader. He also said that group had significant political strength, so we needed to be very careful in our response.

After listening to the consensus of local movement leaders, we decided not to claim the body or demand justice. The young man had been under our ministry oversight but, unbeknownst to me at the time, he also had joined a seminary. This switch by a man trained in one religious institution not only to a new faith but also to receiving training in a Christian institution was too frontal. It presented a challenge to the honor of his previous connections.

From this we realized that we must exercise wisdom in such cases. Moving someone from a previous religious institution directly to a Christian religious institution, then sending him back to witness in his prior context, was a mistake we needed not to repeat. However, at the time of this young man’s death, the emotions of our top local leaders were so charged that we could not immediately evaluate this openly.

We consulted with the seminary leaders and agreed that they would claim the body and they would demand justice. They had already been exposed in the newspapers, so this would not add risk for them. It would allow us to remain underground and avoid increasing risk to ourselves, local movement leaders, and the network of linked believer groups in our movement.

**5. What measures should we take to reduce risk for our other local movement leaders at different levels of leadership?**

We had many discussions about who would meet with whom, for we knew people would be watching. We had long conversations about how we would meet and where we would meet. The local church planter who carried the greatest risk developed his own process for travel. He would ride his motorcycle to the bus station, then get on and off three different buses at various stations, in order to detect if he was being followed. He and I would meet in a pre-arranged location that we never mentioned by text or telephone. He asked me to sit against a certain wall where I could view the people coming through the door without being spotted. I always made sure no one was following me before meeting him there.

After the immediate danger had subsided and many months had passed, I had the opportunity to consult with advisors who sold risk-reduction advice to the US government for its army. One key idea from that meeting was for each church planter to use three separate telephones (not merely separate numbers). That enabled them to keep their riskiest contacts on just one phone. On a second phone they put their most protected contacts, including family and their close ministry circle. The third phone was used for people in the middle level of security risk.

**6. How can we help local leaders suffering emotional pain because someone they led has been killed? How can we help martyrs’ surviving friends and relatives?**

We first needed to assess which of our local leaders were weathering the storm with the greatest faith and emotional stability. Joko was not one of our most fruitful movement leaders, but he showed excellent stability in this time of crisis. I gave him opportunities to influence and stabilize others who had been shaken by the death. His prayers with others as they grieved led to their relief and restoration. We maximized this brother’s gifts of faith and encouragement in the midst of crisis.

We also drew on our long-standing habit of praying prayers of lament. One third of the Psalms consist of prayers of lament or complaint. Most churches and Christian organizations seldom use these, not wanting to acknowledge people’s negative emotions. We have found these very important to use in our movement because we have so much grief and difficulty to process. If we do not process our grief and complaints before the Lord through laments (as David did), we do not allow our hearts to recalibrate and get right with God again, free of the weight of suffering. This requires patience with people in the midst of complaint and lament. We tend to feel uncomfortable with suffering and want everyone to get over their sadness quickly. But God’s word shows us a better way.

**7. How should we address a persecution crisis, even a martyr's death?**

Each time we experience a crisis, we have an evaluation with our local leadership to identify issues and share decisions on how to respond. First we encourage the nearest leaders to handle as much of the crisis as they can without involving other leaders more broadly. We consider it better not to centralize the handling of persecution back to our top local leaders. When lower levels of leadership can handle persecution, we do not endanger the entire network. We also try to keep decentralizing power, which is essential for a movement to keep multiplying.

We want to make sure that someone with a shepherd’s heart gets mobilized, to allow persecution victims or survivors to process their feelings. We encourage others in the movement to express their feelings in a Brotherhood group. We want to use the crisis to strengthen our Brotherhood ties. This essential glue bonds us relationally within the movement.

We also realize that at times we have to help people move to another location. We normally encourage people to stay put, but this is sometimes not possible – particularly among a more radical group. Therefore, we have pre-arranged communication between leaders, so that those from one area who must evacuate know they will be received by radical-background believers in other areas. This includes providing temporary housing and helping them find a way to return as soon as possible, or find a new way to earn a living.

Our normal pattern of encouraging people to stay and endure often requires skills in social negotiation. Local leaders need to know how to negotiate the support of community leaders, to find solutions and protection from further abuse. Social negotiation is needed at many levels. Although I cannot cover it in detail in this article, the topic does merit further discussion.

**8. What kinds of persecution do we experience? How does that influence the way we address those crises?**

Persecution can happen at the very personal level: within families, such as divorce or rejection by family members. It might take the form of economic suffering, such as being fired from a job or finding local people no longer buy from one’s store. Persecution might also result in property damage, such as a house’s wall being broken down. Many cases of persecution involve beatings, some of which result in hospitalization and others in death. Each kind of persecution requires wisdom to address according to the specific situation.

**9. What kind of inner healing do people need when they have suffered persecution?**

When suffering occurs among a large group of people, the trauma generally seems less for each individual. They realize that suffering constitutes a normal part of following Christ, and they feel communal support. This helps overcome the shaming at the heart of much persecution. Often in group contexts, sympathetic listening to people’s stories suffices. But it might take a long time to tell the story and to shed the necessary tears.

Sometimes people from non-Western cultures say they don’t need to process grief, when in fact they have different ways of processing grief than Westerners. We have counselled many not-yet-believing Muslims, as well as believers, who have taken a long time to process their grief due to others’ evil actions toward them. They have culturally appropriate ways and places for this. In high-shame cultures, people can process shameful events only with outsiders or unusual insiders. For example, the loss of leaders in natural disasters carries no shame, so that can be processed publicly and should be processed together with brothers and sisters, not alone. But in cases of extreme pain, particularly the suffering of one’s loved ones or rape or tragic betrayal, sometimes deeper inner healing counselling is needed. If persecution includes betrayal by someone trusted, this involves a special challenge.

In our normal process, after people feel they have worked through their grief, others pray for them, laying on hands and including many Scriptures in the prayers.

**10. What are the reasons for persecution and suffering?**

Addressing this question well provides wisdom on how to address persecution. Reasons can vary widely. In some cases, persecution comes as the reaction of God’s enemies to the entrance of gospel light and truth. Faithful witness disrupts the status quo of the kingdom of darkness. Or sometimes a shortage of shrewdness (Matthew 10:16) opens a door to persecution.

In other cases, persecution might be triggered by factors only indirectly related to the gospel. Often, persecution results from economic or status jealousy. In one case, for example, persecution arose because a leaders’ group received a loan but decided not to give the loan to an untrustworthy brother. This jealous brother turned them in to the police for having Bible studies, which resulted in three brothers’ imprisonment. But the shared testimony of those three overcame the accusations of just one man. In the end, the three imprisoned leaders were released after only one week, because they supported one another in their testimony. Solidarity within our brotherhood often helps to navigate persecution.

Another time, a local doctor became jealous that doctors from outside the area had been brought in for a medical clinic. He reported the sponsoring group as a spiritual community, informing high-level military officers, which led to much trouble.

In another case, a man who had started four believer groups, and continued leading them, was beaten and hospitalized. When visited, he said he felt God was punishing him for his multiple marriages. These two legally registered marriages had taken place before he came to saving faith, and both had yielded children to support. We helped him reinterpret the reasons for suffering by showing him the verse about God hating divorce (Malachi 2:16). We helped him understand God’s grace that enables him to remain in the situation he was in when God called him to faith (1 Corinthians 7:20). We also shared 1 Timothy 3:2, limiting his role as a leader, and encouraged him to develop others as leaders.

God’s reasons override all human reasons for suffering. We have found that through healthy biblical processing of suffering in our ministry together, we enjoy a much deeper brotherhood and commitment through suffering.

**11. What plans and preparations should we make so that leaders share a common understanding before suffering occurs?**

We discuss the possibility of dying for our faith, so believers in the movement have the opportunity to wrestle through this issue in prayer and the Scriptures before they face the storm.

As leaders process together events of suffering and persecution in the movement, we all gain perspective and become better equipped to respond to future events of suffering.

We also use the pattern of a plurality of leaders: leaders serve in teams of three or more. In addition to pastoral benefits and diversity of gifting, this pattern plays a critical role in responding to crises. If one leader dies, we have others who can fill their shoes. An attack on one leader doesn’t scatter the flock.

Many other practical steps can be taken to prepare for suffering. That theme, too, is worthy of further development in a future article.