

## **Christian Persecution and its Implications for the Church: A Case of Persecuted Christians in Garissa Township Constituency, Garissa County, Kenya**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The story of the early Church is a narrative of great persecution that aimed at censoring Christianity. Kenya has experienced a high level of Christian persecution in the North-Eastern part of the country, particularly Garissa, Mandera, and Wajir Counties. This has implications for the Church thus this study investigated the Christian persecution and its implications for the Church among Christians in Garissa County. The study used the qualitative method and developed an interview guide with open-ended questions in collecting data. The composition of the population was adult Christians from Garissa Township Constituency. The interview questions were administered to a sample of 30 respondents in the English language. The study found out that 90% of the participants have experienced certain forms of persecution ranging from death threats and economic discrimination, to violent extremist attacks and social exclusion. The study also identified several ways of preparedness to face persecution which include: reading and memorizing the Word of God, prayer, and fasting, and trusting in God. To how participants responded to persecution, five responses were identified including: prayer, staying and enduring, aggressive love, and fleeing. Several implications of persecution for the Church were also identified which include: loss of life and properties, physical and psychological torture, and unity of the Church. The study recommends that the Kenyan Church put pressure on the government to heighten security in the region. The persecuted church too, where possible, should be a vibrant part of the society, avoid giving unnecessary offense and bringing on “avoidable” persecution.

Keywords: Persecution, Church, Christian, Implications, Garissa

### **Introduction**

Garissa County has come to the global attention due to a series of terror attacks. On November 5th, 2011, the East African Pentecostal Church in Garissa town was attacked with two grenades resulting in the death of two people including a young girl, and five others suffered injuries. In 2012 on the 1st of July, two churches in Garissa town were attacked, with seventeen people killed with sixty others suffering injuries. On this fateful day, the terrorists snatched firearms from Kenya Police after which they arrived at the church and started shooting at the congregants.

On the 2nd of April 2015, another deadly attack happened at Garissa University College killing 147 mainly Christian students and leaving many others injured. In this incident, it was reported that the attackers fired randomly at Christian students who had woken up at 5:00 a.m. for morning prayers. Also reported was that the terrorists held students in their hostels, allowed

the Muslim students to walk out after they successfully recited some passages in the Quran, and later other students were executed.

The Scriptures present a clear record of Christian persecution in both Testaments. We see for instance, that the Philistines and Amalekites continuously launched an assault on the early Jews because they were opposed to the worship of idols (1 Sam. 2-10). Unfortunately, when they left the covenant way they became persecutors of their Jewish prophets who were trying to reconcile them back to the covenant way of life. Also in the New Testament, Jesus Christ was persecuted by the Pharisees who doubted his divinity. After His death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, there followed great persecutions against his disciples with the main perpetrator being Saul of Tarsus before his conversion and later becoming the Apostle Paul. Every disciple of Jesus suffered a great deal. Paul and Peter were martyred under Emperor Nero. According to Zavada, Paul was beheaded while Peter was crucified, though upside down at his request since he did not feel worthy to die in a similar way to his Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. (Zavada, 2012)

This study pays special attention to Christian persecution and its implication to the Church, a case of Christians in Garissa County. It sought answers to the question among others: How Christians in the selected area experience persecution. It also sought insights from Christians in the area of study regarding their responses to persecution and the implications of such persecution to the body of Christ.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem this study sought to address was that there are Christians who do not believe in the reality of Christian persecution especially those in urban centers like Nairobi. Probably, because they live in cities and areas where there is little or no serious persecution. In addition, there are Christians who believe in persecution but tend to attribute it only to terrorist attacks that have been targeting the churches especially in Kenya's coast and Northeastern Kenya. These forms of attribution are the evidence of little or lack of knowledge on the nature of persecution. The Scriptures present a clear picture of Christians under persecution. While on His ministry on earth, Jesus pronounced it clearly that his followers would be hated, excluded from the community, and rejected. "Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man." (Luke 6:22). The study sought to ascertain if indeed a Christian can experience hatred, rejection and other forms of discrimination on basis of their Christian affiliation in the community.

When Christians lack such an important part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ on persecution, it is justifiable to state that such Christians will not be prepared for persecution in case it happens to them. The subject of persecution is very clear in the Bible, and Christians ought to be aware of the modern gospel of prosperity that belittles sound doctrines especially on persecution. This study aimed at interacting with Christians of Garissa Township Constituency, Garissa County to find out from their life experiences the forms of persecution and the implications of such persecution for the Church in Kenya and globally.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study unravels Christian persecution among Christians in Garissa Township Constituency. The findings and recommendations presented in this study are of great importance

for the Church in Kenya and the Global Church. This is a wake-up call for Christians who are in free cities and countries that do not experience persecution based on religion. They must understand the situation of their brothers and sisters in Garissa and fast-track means of support and solidarity. This study also confirms what the scriptures teach the believers on suffering and persecution.

In the Scriptures, Apostle Paul tells the believers to “expect to suffer for Jesus’ sake” (Phil. 1:29). Additionally, Christians need to know whether or not the persecution is self-afflicted or meant for sanctification because suffering could be a result of foolish actions instead of righteousness on the part of the persecuted. If it is the result of foolish acts, a Christian should respond by repenting and seeking the wisdom of God and if that persecution is purely for the sake of Christ, Christians need to endure it. In this study, biblical reasons that God could allow the persecution of Christians are also identified; since the Bible has clear approaches to suffering. Christians therefore must learn to discern, sort, and weigh the different biblical perspectives when facing persecution.

## **Literature Review**

### **A Brief History of Persecution in the Church**

Reading through the book of Acts, persecution rears its ugly head many times. The apostles are beaten up in Acts 5. In Acts 7 the crowd of Jews stones Stephen to death. Immediately after Stephen’s death, Acts 8:1-3 says,

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.” (Acts 8:1-3).

At first, most persecution of the Christians came from the Jews. They did not want to believe that Jesus was a spiritual messiah. Instead, they wanted a warrior messiah to free them from the Romans. In his teachings, Christ maintained that his disciples would be persecuted “Remember the word that I said unto you. The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also” (John 15:20).

### **Preparation for Persecution**

Carl Gallups theorizes that knowing what is going on in the world could help Christians prepare for persecution. He indicates that congregations are ignorant of the persecution of Christians and need to exhibit a willingness to learn about it. Furthermore, Christians need to learn to recognize persecution and prepare to speak out against it. The main focus is not whether Christians should prepare for persecution, but how should they prepare for it? (Gallups, 2015).

Gregory Cochran maintains that understanding the hostile relationship between the world and God should encourage Christians to prepare for religious persecution. The practice of persecution should not be addressed as though it is yet to come, but it should be taught to the church as a current reality. The reality of persecution should become part of the Sunday school lesson and the Sunday sermon (Cochran, 2016).

In the New Testament, we see the demand of Jesus on His followers to tread the path of persecution. As He prepared to send His disciples out as sheep among wolves, He told them that they would likely die in the process of carrying out their ministry. To build His Church (Matthew 16:18), His death was necessary, as He points out in Matthew 16:21. This is the foundation. Without Christ's death, there is no redeemed community of believers. But just as Christ's cross was needed to establish His Church, our (Christ's disciples) crosses are needed to build His Church (Matthew 16:24). Both are needed.

In Romans 5:3-5, the Apostle Paul stresses that going through persecution is an essential element of a person's training: "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

Jesus made it very clear to His disciples that they would be persecuted by the world: "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.'" (John 15: 20). In this statement, it came out evidently to the followers of Christ that the master's lot is the servant's lot. Disciples follow the same path as their teachers.

Persecution is, therefore, inevitable for the Christian. There is no doubt, from a biblical point of view; to have to suffer persecution is to walk along the same road as the prophets, the saints, and the martyrs. To suffer persecution is to experience the fellowship of Christ, as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did in the furnace (Daniel 3:19-25). It is not always so dramatic, but it is nevertheless real.

### **Purpose of Persecution**

Several benefits of persecution are disclosed in Clinton LeFort's book, *Persecution, and Its Benefits*. One is that persecution gives Christians the benefit of strengthening their motivations and purposes for following Christ. He further lists nine benefits of persecution that can promote spiritual maturity. The benefits deal with freedom, motivation, truth, prayer, humility, giving attention to God, remaining in God, freedom from anxiety, and loving God. (LeFort, 2014). This lets Christians know that God has a purpose for allowing them to suffer persecution. Christ foretold his disciples of the imminent persecution. He prepared them enough so that by the time suffering showed up in their lives they had knowledge of it. Jesus further assured his followers that, if they would suffer for righteousness' sake, the kingdom of God belongs to them. "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom. "Blessed are you, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake" (Matthew. 5:10-11).

Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Nina Shea in the book *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians*, indicate that persecution of Christians is intended to affect all traditions operating in the Christian faith, including Roman Catholics, Protestants, and numerous others. (Marshall, P., Lela, G & Shea, N, 2013). John Piper in his exposition on the growth of Christianity predicts that Christianity will become the primary religion in Africa and the African diaspora by 2050, due to significant growth that will occur primarily because of persecution (Piper 2010). Christians can connect with God's global purpose of the Great Commission to gather souls from every tongue and nation as instructed by Jesus (Matt. 28:18-20). An unknown portion of these

souls will join God's family due to persecution and even martyrdom. God ultimately has a global purpose for allowing Christians to suffer persecution.

### **Preparation for Persecution**

Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey in the book entitled, *Disciple-Making Is: How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence*, urge Christians to approach persecution with a theological mindset. (Earley, D & Dempsey, R 2013). Christians must consider counting the cost associated with salvation and the command to fulfill the Great Commission (Luke 14:28). Earley and Dempsey, knowing that the Gospel is an offense to the world, reminded Christians that they are not to be content until they have planted churches throughout the whole world (Gal. 5:11). Earley and Dempsey in no way encourage Christians to shy away from evangelizing the world because of the threat of persecution. Instead, Christians are reminded of the obligation to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20).

Klaus Issler in his book, *Living into the Life of Jesus*, provides the theological reminder that Jesus prepared himself for trials by vigilance and prayer and therefore set an example for Christians to follow. Spiritual disciplines are available to help Christians develop in their faith (Issler 2013). Issler intentionally reminds Christians that Jesus depended heavily on the Holy Spirit and implied that the same principle applies to all believers.

### **Biblical View on Persecution**

There is a clear scriptural link between persecution and discipleship. The New Testament shows us clearly that there can be no discipleship without persecution; to follow Christ is to join Him in a cross-carrying journey of reconciling the world to the Father. In the New Testament, we see the demand of Jesus on His followers to tread the path of persecution. As He prepared to send His disciples out as sheep among wolves, He told them that they would likely die in the process of carrying out their ministry. To build His Church (Matthew 16:18), His death was necessary, as He points out in Matthew 16:21. This is the foundation. Without Christ's death, there is no redeemed community of believers. But just as Christ's cross was needed to establish His Church, our (Christ's disciples) crosses are needed to build His Church (Matthew 16:24). Both are needed.

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With our hunger and thirst for righteousness comes the promise of persecution for those who take a stand for God. We have not been called to safety and comfort but to serve amid conflict. Persecution is not to be strenuously avoided, for it is the result of righteous living. To avoid it, one would have to cease living righteously. The passage in Matthew 5:11-12 says: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for, in the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:11-12).

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they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.” (John 15: 20). In this statement, it came out evidently to the followers of Christ that the master’s lot is the servant’s lot. Disciples follow the same path as their teachers.

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As disciples of Christ Jesus, we are repeatedly reminded in Scriptures that our lot is to follow in the footsteps of our Lord and Master Jesus. When Jesus gave the last major teaching session to His disciples in John 15, He included a serious prediction about the reactions of the world. Jesus told His followers to remain in Him as a branch in the vineyard is connected to the main stalk (John 15 - 17). He reminded them again of His command that they were to love each other as He had loved them and was willing to lay down His life for them; the highest form of love. He further alerted them that the world would hate them but “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...for they do not know the One who sent me” (John 15:18-21). A little further down in the discourse, He continues, “...in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God” (John 16:2b). This is so common today in many places, especially where Christians are the minorities. It has been witnessed and reported that when persecutors kill Christians, they loudly shout “Allahu Akbar” in Arabic translated to mean “God is great” or a general declaration of thanksgiving. As Jesus had told His disciples that they would suffer for righteousness' sake, it came to pass. Clearly, every single one of our Lord’s disciples suffered torture, vilified, exiled and executed for their conviction that Jesus Christ is alive and He is Lord! Yet they accomplished in obedience Jesus’ instructions for establishing His church among the nations to the world.

History tells us what happened to Jesus’ disciples: Philip was scourged and crucified, Matthew was nailed to the ground with spikes and beheaded, Jude was beaten to death with sticks and clubs, Simon was tortured and crucified, John, the son of Zebedee, was tortured and exiled on Patmos, James, the brother of John, was beheaded, James (the less) was pushed from the top of a building; then his broken body was beaten to death, Andrew, Peter’s brother, hung on a cross for three days before dying, Bartholomew was beaten and skinned alive before being beheaded, Thomas was speared with a javelin while Peter was crucified upside down.

### **Meaning and Purpose of Suffering in the Will of God**

When Christians suffer in the will of God, suffering always has meaning and purpose. There are several biblical reasons why God allows suffering such is that: Suffering proves and purifies our faith (1 Peter 1:6-7; 5:10; Romans 5:3-4; James 1:2-4), It burns away pride, as it did in Paul’s life (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), It makes our lives more holy (Hebrews 12:3-10), Suffering contributes to the spiritual strength of others (Philippians 1:14). It accomplishes purposes unknown to us now (1 Corinthians 13:12) and it brings us together in unity (John 17:23) and this unity brings spiritual power (Acts 2:42-47).

Further it is observed that suffering often brings about a greater harvest of souls (Acts 8:1-4), It blesses the believers (Matthew 5:10-11). Jesus specifies that we are blessed if we suffer for righteousness and His name’s sake. Also suffering causes what we believe to become evident to others. James in his letter to the early Christians lists the qualities that trials of many kinds

develop in us (James 1:2-3). Suffering and persecution turn our hearts and minds to the glory that will be ours in heaven. Jesus promises a great reward in heaven to those who suffer (Matthew 5:12).

Apostle Paul said that the sufferings of the present are not worthy to be compared with the glory of the future (Romans 8:17-18), and Peter agrees that “In all this, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials (1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:13; 5:1-10). It is thus evident that suffering causethose who suffer to share in the suffering of Jesus and in suffering, the Christian is following the example of Jesus (1 Peter 2:21-25) as we participate with Him in His suffering (Romans 8:17; Philippians 3:10; 1 Peter 4:13). Scripturally, Christ’s suffering was prophesied (as ours has been). He was rejected by the world (as we are). He was insulted and suffered physical pain and physical death.

In the “free countries” which do not experience persecution, most Christians in these parts of the world enjoy the blessing of liberty today because men and women in the past were willing to buy it at the cost of their blood, sweat, and tears. However, this liberty is not to be interpreted to mean that there is no persecution. Persecution is a way of life for the disciples of Christ. Therefore, the degree of persecution may vary from one place to another, from one person to the other, and one gender to the other, etc.

### **Research Design**

The central part of any research project is the research design. The research design refers to the overall strategy that a researcher chooses to integrate the different components of the study coherently and logically, thereby, ensuring he/she effectively addresses the research problem; it constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data. The research design aims to ensure that the evidence obtained enables the researcher to effectively address the research problem logically and as unambiguously as possible. However, it is the research problem that determines the type of design a researcher should use (Creswell, 2007).

In this case, this study carried out qualitative research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It generally provides insights into the problem. The study found a qualitative study method convenient since it aimed at getting deep insights into the problem of persecution among Christians living in Garissa County and the implications for the Church. Additionally, the study used a particular type of qualitative design that is a qualitative case study, the purpose of which was to find a comprehensive understanding of Christian persecution and its implications for the Church from selected Christians in Garissa County.

### **Sample Size and Sampling Techniques**

In his argument, De Vos says that “the sampling criterion is designed to make the population as homogenous as possible.” (De Vos, 1998). To support these views Polit and Hungler maintain that “this approach is helpful when the researcher wishes to understand a particular group of people well” (Polit and Hungler 1995). Since the study aimed to understand Christian persecution among Christians in Garissa County it adopted the following sampling technique to attain homogeneity:

The Phase One sample was selected from the population which was required to meet the following criterion:

- a. Be ministers who have ministered and continues to minister to their churches within the selected area. This was to ensure that the informants had a clear understanding of persecution in their area without which the information would not be factual.
- b. Have pastored/ministered and stayed in the region for at least five years. This was considered because having stayed for at least five years, meaning that the pastors had first-hand information about any event of the behavior of the congregants and the local community as well during his five-year stay, which would be helpful to this study.

The Phase Two sample was selected from the population that met the following criterion:

- a. Adult Christians attending the churches in Garissa County as this study focused on persecution in Garissa County.
- b. Adults having lived no fewer than five years within Garissa Town to ensure that the informants had a good understanding of their surroundings regarding the study question.

### **Data Collection**

The study adopted online focus group interviews as means of collecting data as this study was done during the Covid-19 crisis in the country. This was achieved through phone calls, text messages, WhatsApp, Zoom meetings, Skype, and emails. The first phase of interviews included the religious leaders; pastors and bishops, while Phase two of focus group interviews included the adult Christians who attend church in Garissa for not less than five years. Omery explains that a focus group is “a carefully planned discussion group designed to obtain information about a defined area of interest in a permissive non-threatening environment” (Cohen & Omery, 1994). The selection of a focus group interview was exercised because it is efficient to obtain the viewpoints of many individuals in a short time.

The group interviews were carried out as follows; Phase1 group consisted of 12 informants. Among the 12 leaders, nine participants were men while three participants were women. Phase 2 comprised 18 informants. Among this group, there were 8 adult youths between 18-25 years (5 males and 3 females) and the remaining 10 participants were senior adults between 26-65, from whom five were females and the rest five were males.

The researcher recorded interviews by a separate recorder and computer-based recording software. The informant had prior knowledge of the researcher’s intent to record the interviews. The study used structured questions that had been prepared in advance for this research. In addition, the questions were open-ended.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of bringing orderly structure and meaning to the mass of information collected and it involves examining what has been collected and making deductions and inferences. It is the systematic organization and synthesis of research data (Polit & Hungler, 1995). The data collected in this study were transcribed word perfect, intensely read several times to identify concepts such as situations and ideas like a person’s interpretation of the world or situation in which they find themselves at any given moment, how they come to have that point of view of their situation or environment in which they find themselves, how they relate to others within their world, how they cope within their world, their view of their history and the history of others who share their own experiences and situations, coded, categorized and grouped into themes.

## Findings

The study focused on religious leaders who were in charge of Christian congregations for not less than five years and adult Church members (Christians) who had fellowshipped in the specified area of study for not less than five years. This study identified 30 respondents all of whom had been drawn from different churches and denominations in Garissa Township Constituency. All of the purposively identified thirty Christians in Garissa Township Constituency were contacted and were able to complete the interviews.

### Forms of Christian Persecution

This study identified four forms of persecution among Christians in Garissa. These includes: death threats, economic discrimination, and violent extremist and social exclusion.

### Death Threats

Twenty-eight participants out of thirty said that they received death threats either directly or indirectly. Twenty-five participants said that they received death threats directly from the perceived persecutors while three said they received the threats through friends and relatives. Participant 003 said,

One evening we were conducting prayers at the Church when my wife received a call from a stranger informing her that there was a plan to kill me on my way home after Church after the service. I had to call the police to patrol at the Church that evening. I also had to spend the night at the church office through the advice of my wife and Church elders.

He added that it was not an act of cowardice to spend the night at the Church but it was wise even though the planned attack was not to happen. The interviewee informed this study that back in 2017 a pastor in the neighboring church received a similar call informing him that there was a planned attack on his family and three days later they were indeed attacked. The study discovered that death threats were a common form of persecution among Christians in this region. The study further noted that despite reporting these threats to the local police, there were no investigations done to find the culprits behind the threats. It also emerged that Christians were not only threatened on the phone but also, on several incidences, threatened physically. However, as this study discovered, most of the threats never materialized but it was clear that such threats caused so much fear among Christians interviewed.

### Economic Discrimination

Twenty-seven participants said that they were economically discriminated against. Participant 017 said that it was so difficult to land a job at the local government. "I have worked for the Central Government for six years until my husband was posted here and I had to resign to be with my family. With my vast experience in Governance, I was pretty sure that I would easily be considered for a job at the local county Government but to my surprise, it turned out the other way round."

The study identified various ways Christians were economically discriminated among them, those Christians working for the Central government were not consulted in their areas of expertise, and they were not informed officially of any changes or decisions made by the

management. One interviewee noted that she mainly relies on the sub-ordinate staff that are close to her and can easily get information from management. This study also found out that in some instances there are Christians who lost their jobs as they failed to convert to Islam. One interviewee said, “At some point last year during Eid ul-Fitr my boss lightly told me that if I were a Muslim I would not miss out much of the beauty and joy that are attached to such Muslim Holidays.” He further said that though his boss is respectful of his faith and beliefs, it is a temptation that one can easily fall into given the persuasions from such a person of his class and status in the society, but this can only happen if one’s faith is not built on a strong foundation. This study also revealed that it was difficult for Christians in businesses to supply for the local government. One interviewee said that he had applied for the government tender for years unsuccessfully.

### **Violent Extremist Attacks**

Twenty-four participants said that they were affected by violent extremist attacks that almost occurred every week. According to participant 015, on the 1st of November 2011, he was at the East Africa Pentecostal Church in Garissa town when it was attacked. During this attack, two people were killed on the spot while several others were injured. He experienced severe post-traumatic stress disorder following the attack and had to attend weekly counseling sessions for four months in Nairobi. The attack had a major impact on him and his family, not just psychologically but also socially whereby he could not walk into malls, big shopping outlets, or venues with prominent Western symbolism such as the UN Offices and the US Embassy as he believed these were potential terrorist targets. He also recounted that he struggled with unresolved hatred for the Muslims for several months but later the Lord gave him strength and grace to forgive them. Participant 017 who was a local Catholic Church priest also commented, Life in Garissa had changed a lot, as people were afraid that Al-Shabab could attack in the mall, in the bus, in the church or even at the bus stop, “we are not safe”, he said.

On the other hand, Participant 021 said, when she applied for a teaching job in Garissa six years ago, she had expected that the local people would appreciate her role as a teacher and offer her the necessary support to boost learning in the region. However, that was not the case as “sometimes the local people could be having critical security information and they fail to let us (the non-locals) know.” She further added that she lost her cousin who was also a teacher at a nearby Primary School that was attacked in early 2020. “My cousin was a consistent Christian, a performer and trustworthy. I came to learn with grief that it is only the non-local teachers at School who were not aware of that attack” This study established that during this attack, most students at the affected school had prior knowledge of the attack but the local teachers had no hint thus were present. “My cousin was present. To me, this is a betrayal by the colleagues and community” she said. The participant further disclosed to this study that she was in the process of leaving the area for Nairobi “I feel betrayed by the same people that I have come to serve. It hurts more to realize that all this hatred against us (Christians) is because we profess a different faith.

Participant 029 said that he lost his daughter during the 2nd of April 2015 Garissa University College terror attack,

My daughter was an economics second-year student and a committed Christian Union leader at Garissa University College. On this morning when the University was attacked

my daughter had joined other believers in the morning prayers. The Al-Shabab shot them randomly while they were praying and that is how my daughter's life was terminated on the spot.

Another participant informed this study that he had been directly involved in six incidences where the Shabab militants attacked the Christian gatherings and killed believers. "I have lost close friends and relatives here in Garissa. In 2014, my niece came to visit me only to be shot while at the Church. Since then I rarely get relatives here to visit me." When asked why Christians were mainly targeted, he said,

There are so many allegations that are attached to the attacks and killings of Christians in this region. One of the allegations is the way Christians are perceived to be dressing and the way they pray during the Church services. Some local people blame our Pentecostal brethren for praying loudly, but at times you wonder because they also make the very loud call to prayers five times a day (Commented Participant 029).

When further asked about the implications of the attacks on the Church in Garissa the respondents said that before the attacks started, they used to gather more than 300 worshippers every Sunday but as of the time of this study, they could not manage even half of that population, because most of their members were affected by the consistent the attacks and some had to run away to safer places like Nairobi never to come back.

### **Social Exclusion**

Twenty-two participants said that they were socially excluded on various accounts based on their faith and ethnic backgrounds. Some also noted that it was so obvious to be denied job opportunities, aid, and voice in some places and societal issues that matter. Participant 011 said that "it is unfortunate that most Christians especially in Nairobi are not aware of what we go through here as missionaries". The interviewees informed this study that some members of the community treat non-Muslims as non-human in the region. "I was posted here by the National Government as a teacher in 2012 and I can tell you that the community has no respect for non-locals...not even the students that I teach. They look at you as humans of a lower class," noted a teacher who was interviewed. The teacher further commented that Christian teachers are not allowed to share their faith with the students at school. Additionally, they were denied to pray in the school meetings and assemblies.

### **Preparedness in the Face of Persecution**

Through careful analysis of data collected in response to the question, three ways in which Christians in the area of study are prepared to face persecution were identified as follows:

#### **Reading and Memorizing the Word of God.**

All of the thirty participants said that they highly depended on reading and memorizing the Word of God as a way of preparing for persecution. Participant 002 said, "Jesus Christ is our role model on how to be prepared for persecution. I always look up to Him and His teaching in my life as a Christian who is prepared to face whatever persecution and suffering for His sake."

In the face of persecution, Christians find hope in the Word of God. The interviewees said that they read and memorize the Scripture every day. Through the Word of God, they find hope to persevere, grace to endure, why they are persecuted, and also learn how to face the persecutors.

### **Prayer and Fasting.**

Twenty-eight out of thirty participants said that they prepare for persecution through prayer and fasting. Participant 003 said “When a person trusts Christ as Savior they inherit enemies. The Bible says that these enemies will persecute those who have believed. Our Lord and Savior Jesus says in Matthew 5:11 that blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on His account. Rejoice and be glad, ‘for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you.’

This study noted that all interviewees prepared for persecution through prayers. Half of the participants said that they are in Bible study groups where they meet for prayers twice a week. This study also learned that all interviewees prayed with their families every day. Prayer is such a great component in a Christian life that Jesus mainly relied on prayers to His heavenly father throughout His ministry. Through prayer and fasting, God gives Christians hope in their suffering, the Holy Spirit strengthens them, persecuted Christians also learn of the love of God to them through prayers and fasting.

In addition to Christians adopting prayer and fasting to prepare for persecution, this study established that they also use prayers as a way of responding to the persecution as out of thirty participants, twenty-seven said that they responded to persecution through prayers. Participant 005 said,

The Word of God tells us to love and pray for those who persecute us. I have been subjected to a lot of pain but always prayed for the Holy Spirit to help me to forgive. I always pray for our enemies who want to eliminate me and my family but they won't succeed. I pray that my children will also develop a forgiving attitude to the Muslim students who insulted and beat them at school before I transferred them. They keep reminding me of the incident and I have talked to them on why they should forgive but you know children do not forget things easily especially anything psychological.

This study identified several ways in which prayer helped Christians respond to persecution. Among these are: seeking strength in times of trouble, asking God for grace to face persecutors with the Gospel of truth, praying for the security agencies as they are also at the risk of experiencing the pain of violence, freedom from fear and anxiety, and praying for the departed to live in the light of God's face.

### **Trusting in God.**

Thirty out of thirty participants said that they trust in God for their lives. The participants said that as long as their ways are right with God they have nothing to fear. Participant 005 said that she had been to Garissa as a public servant and has learned the need to fully trust in God.

I have been harassed and excluded in many things at my workplace especially my first three years in this county. I thank God these days they do not mistreat me as they used to. They realized that I am a faithful and blameless servant of the living God. I have always

trusted God for my protection and I am no longer afraid to say that I'm a Christian. I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone that believes.

The interviewees revealed what it means to trust in God in times of suffering and persecution. As observed, to trust in God is to believe in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of God in whatever the situation. Participant 026 said that when it comes to trusting God, that means "believing in His reliability, His Word, His ability, and His strength as God Almighty. Trusting that He loves me and has good in store for me even in my suffering." This study identified various ways in which Christians under persecution submit to God. Among these are: seeking truth in the Scripture, confessing unbelief, sharing their testimony, walking in the Holy Spirit, and waiting upon the Lord.

### **Christian Responses to Persecution**

After analysis of data collected in response to this research question three, ways on how Christians respond to persecution emerged as follows:

#### **Staying and Enduring.**

Twenty out of thirty participants said they cannot flee but instead will stay and endure the persecution. Participant 002 said, "It is God who sent me here to reach out to this community. He called me and I responded by coming here. I will not leave here unless the Lord tells me to leave. My heart is at peace and my spirit is rejoicing to endure whatever afflictions the world puts on me." This study established that most of the Christians living in Garissa were on government assignment and some are Kenyan missionaries who were convinced that it was the will of God for them to stay and proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom of God, thus fleeing was not an option for many.

#### **Aggressive Love**

Twenty-one out of thirty participants said they respond to persecution with aggressive love. Each said that they practice what Jesus says: to love, doing good, blessing and praying for all those who hate and mistreat them. Participant 003 said, "It is so painful to realize that some people just hate you based on what you believe in. Sometimes I sit down and painful memories appear in my mind but I remember that the Bible tells me that vengeance and revenge must be left to God." The participants said that by expressing unconditional love the persecutors will come to know Christ. This study concludes that it is biblical for Christians who are suffering for the sake of righteousness to show love to the persecutors as it is anchored in the Scriptures; "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." (Matthew 5:44).

#### **Fleeing**

Fifteen participants said they have in one way or the other responded to persecution through fleeing. Participant 009 said, "When it became too obvious that I was the target, I had to relocate to Nairobi for six months. I later came back but changed to a different apartment five

kilometers away from where I used to live before.” This study observes that though God is capable of any kind of physical salvation or deliverance His general advice to His people is to "flee, get out, and get away from the trouble." Even though God could protect one amid trouble, He still gives this general advice. This in no way denigrates God, and it in no way makes for a "cowardly Christian" when he flees persecution and possibly certain death. We have to understand that God places responsibilities on us. As we take His advice to flee He will "open up the mountain" before us, so we can follow the path that He makes clear for us (Matthew 10:22-23). However, a Christian should be sure that is through the clear voice of God that he/she decides to flee persecution.

### **Implications of Christian Persecution to the Church**

After analyzing data collected in response to this research question, three implications of persecution to the Church emerged as follows:

#### **Loss of Life and Property**

Twenty-eight out of thirty participants said that constant persecution of Christians has had resulted in the loss of lives and properties. “On 1st November 2011 I was at the East Africa Pentecostal Church in Garissa town when the church was attacked and two brethren were killed on the spot while several others were injured. The church building was partially destroyed and we had to do a fundraiser to make repairs and buy a few other items that were destroyed. The most painful thing was that we could not bring back the lives of our beloved brothers and sisters. I experienced severe post-traumatic stress disorder following the attack and had to attend weekly counseling sessions for months” says Participant 015. The study found out that most of the Christians and churches in Garissa have incurred losses as their properties were destroyed. Among them are pastors and missionaries whose houses were broken into and household items destroyed. The study also noted that many Christians have lost their lives in Garissa over the last 10 years.

#### **Physical and Psychological Torture.**

Participant 012 said, “It is very painful to remember the events that unfolded eight years ago at Africa Inland Church. The memories are very fresh. On this day we had very good attendance and we had a breakthrough in our worship service. No one knew that a good number of our brothers and sisters would die of gunshots this day. I was seated in the front row and my eyes were closed in prayer when I heard gunshots from outside the church, it was the terrorist who had invaded our church. I opened my eyes only to witness a stampede as brethren were fleeing the church. By this time the terrorist had entered the church and they were shooting randomly. I was caught up in the stampede and was shot on my back. I fell on the floor and became unconscious. Later I found myself in Garissa General Hospital.”

This study noted that 20 out of 30 Christians interviewed were going through trauma and psychological-related challenges due to the events that have happened in their lives. Some of the ways these were manifested in their lives were through an emotional flashback of attacks, dreams, and symbols or sounds that reminded them of the previous attacks. Six of the

interviewed Christians had physical scars as a result of the attacks. This study noted with concern the need for counseling and care support to the persecuted.

### **Unity**

Twenty-seven out of thirty participants said that persecution brought back the unity of the Body of Christ in the region and the country as a whole. Participant 012 said “when our Church was attacked in 2012, we received a lot of support across the globe from the family of believers. Christians from all walks of life prayed for us. The Church in Kenya united and spoke in one podium and condemned the attack. I believe we do not require such suffering for us to come together.” It is important, according to the interviewees, for the Church of Christ to embrace unity, and Christians in other parts of the country should stand in solidarity, pray and support those in Garissa and other parts of the country experiencing persecution.

### **Conclusion**

Among other things, the results show that contrary to common perception, resident Muslims are not the sole perpetrators of the persecution of Christians, with serious repression taking place under the local county government and jihadists from Somalia through the porous Kenya-Somalia border. The study observes that there are also several incidences mainly economic and politically instigated, where attacks take place, though not directly meant to harm Christians. According to the respondents, the government (both local and central), has to take the blame for rampant corruption and laxity of the security apparatus. It also emerged that on several occasions, the local Muslims are aware of attacks before they happen as reported by three interviewees who said that on one incidence some members of the community who are non-Christians knew of the impending attack and alerted their colleagues to avoid the hotel that was attacked the following day.

The responses of Christians varied, depending on the level of repression as highlighted in the findings of this study. Some flee while others stay to endure. This study was fully informed that there are no cases of Christians embracing terrorist dynamics that is, taking up arms for self-defense, but instead, Christians embraced aggressive love. This study further established that the following are the agents of persecution in Garissa; Non-state agents instigated and tolerated by the local government. It was evident from the participants that the government is not involved in their persecution. However, the local County Government was involved indirectly. It was noted that some local government officials, exert some strong opposition to Christians. The study also found non-state agents, against which the state is willing but unable to provide enough security due to corruption and porous border between Kenya and Somalia. Also notably, some family relatives are part of agents of persecution especially Christians from a Muslim background who face suffering and persecution for their decision to change their faith from Islam to Christianity.

Muslim extremists are the main agents of persecution in the Garissa Town Constituency. Reportedly, these are people, who are mainly not part of the community. They are trained and radicalized in Somalia and are responsible for church attacks, killings, and maiming of Christians.

Muslim extremist sympathizers also play a key role in supporting the persecutors financially, hosting and hiding the persecutors who launch mass violence which regularly expresses itself through the bombing of churches, as has been experienced in Garissa Town for

the last decade. The perpetrators raise levels of fear amongst the Christian community and attempt to suppress their appetite to practice the right to public expression of freedom of religion or belief.

### **Recommendations**

The Church should advocate for enough security in the North-Eastern region of the country by the Government to stop attacks on churches and institutions, offer Christian counseling and care support to the persecuted Church. As revealed by this study, some persecuted Christians suffer high levels of psychological and emotional stress, as well as spiritual challenges.

The Church should provide resources for persecuted communities, including Bibles, training for pastors, Christians, humanitarian relief, and development assistance. Also, the study recommends that, supporters of persecuted Christians should raise awareness of persecution among congregations in more religiously free areas of the world, teaching these congregations about solidarity with persecuted churches and what they can learn from persecuted churches. They should encourage Christians to visit persecuted churches where possible; form links with churches on the front line and encourage churches to help persecuted Christians in practical ways. And finally, academics should conduct evenhanded, objective research that precisely documents the state of religious freedom in a given country or area, influence government policy institutes and think tanks to promote religious freedom in the region.

#### **This research recommends the following areas of further research:**

1. Research on Christian children and teenagers may be conducted.
2. Further research can be done using mixed methods to gather deeper information that has more statistics on Christian persecution.
3. Research on other parts of Kenya including North-Eastern like Mandera, Wajir among others may be conducted to get the deeper status of Christian persecution and religious freedom.

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