

ANNUAL REPORT

2016



CONTENTS


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INTRODUCTION

MEC
supports
people
in the
Middle East
and
North Africa
who are
marginalised,
discriminated
against or
persecuted
for being or
becoming
Christians



2016 was another turbulent year for the Middle East and North Africa region. Media headlines were dominated by the intractable conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes of Syria and Yemen, the atrocities of extremist groups, the struggles of the millions who were displaced or refugees, and the ratcheting up of geo-political tensions by the intervention and posturing of international and regional powers.

The challenges for those whom MEC supports are obvious. As we assist and equip those in the region who are marginalised, discriminated against or persecuted because of their Christian faith, the extent of injustice and suffering can be overwhelming. And yet we count it a huge privilege to stand alongside so many who inspire us by their example of faith, courage, dignity and perseverance.

During 2016 MEC engaged with nearly 300 individual cases of persecution, covering all 24 countries and territories in the region. The advice we offered, the practical support we gave, the political advocacy we undertook, the prayer we mobilised and the equipping and training we provided were only possible because of an extensive support network around the world. From influential politicians to funding partners to faithful pray-ers, each part of that network plays a crucial role. We offer our sincere thanks to all who share in this vital work.

Many in the region struggle to discern signs of hope. However, to use the title of a collaborative project we are engaged in with key partners, our conviction is that there is 'Hope for the Middle East'! That hope – evident in the faith of those we serve, the commitment of our many local partners and the dedication of other supporters – is firmly rooted in our loving and sovereign God.

Daniel Hoffman
Executive Director, MEC

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

OVERVIEW

2016 saw continuing security and political volatility in much of the Middle East and North Africa, often accompanied by erosion of respect for human rights.

The devastating conflict in **Syria** intensified, with increased Russian intervention bolstering President Assad who claimed significant victories, particularly in Aleppo in December. However, the loss of life, destruction and displacement were immense and prospects of a lasting settlement remain distant. Daesh continues its brutal control of swathes of territory. Hundreds of other opposition groups operate, some also intent on imposing their interpretation of Islamic law. In **Iraq** operations by the army and Kurdish forces led to the 'liberation' of some areas captured by Daesh in 2014, including some predominantly Christian villages. Political tensions and conflict persist between Arab Sunni, Shi'a and Kurds.

Peace talks aimed at ending **Yemen's** deadly conflict between the Saudi-backed government and Houthi rebels repeatedly stalled. The absence of the rule of law has seen extremist groups thrive and the deteriorating humanitarian crisis was described by the UN as 'catastrophic'. **Libya** remains volatile and divided, with a UN-backed 'unity government' installed in Tripoli at odds with the rival Tobruk-based government. This confusion and conflict over governance structures fosters a dangerous security vacuum.

REGIONAL SITUATION & CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The context of conflict, volatility and human rights concern has had implications for the Christian communities of the region.

Christian support for the Assad regime in **Syria** remains considerable, often driven by political expediency or a greater fear of alternatives. Assad gave assurances a new Constitution would 'eliminate discrimination toward religious minorities', while some opposition leaders made similar pledges. Small numbers of displaced Christians have returned to 'liberated' areas of **Iraq** and some churches have resumed services. However, the challenge of physical rebuilding is matched by the challenge of rebuilding trust – most who were displaced do not yet have sufficient confidence in political institutions to return. Some Christian political movements renewed calls for safe zones or autonomous areas for minorities – proposals that are not generally endorsed by church leaders.

During 2016 there was a growing campaign to designate atrocities committed by Daesh against Christians and Yazidis as 'genocide'. This designation was formally endorsed by the European Parliament (in February), US Congress (in March) and UK Parliament (in April). Many Middle Eastern church leaders have been cautious about this campaign, emphasising that atrocities against Christians should be recognised as part of a broader context of violence, including crimes against humanity, which has affected all communities.

Despite a thawing of international relations and some lifting of sanctions, tensions continued in **Iran** between conservatives and reformists. Although parliamentary elections saw gains for moderates, Iran's conservative leaders maintained tight control.

2016 was a turbulent year for **Turkey**. Attempts to take advantage of considerable leverage with Europe over refugee issues played alongside the intensifying conflict between state forces and outlawed Kurdish separatists, with increasingly authoritarian responses to terror attacks by the PKK (against state targets) and Daesh (against civilians). The attempted coup on 15 July, attributed to Gulenists, led to a state of emergency and the bolstering of the President's executive powers. Vast purges of perceived dissidents from state institutions were carried out, together with increased restrictions on freedom of expression, including media restrictions.

Domestic discontent in **Egypt** grew significantly, particularly over economic conditions but also because of restrictive press laws and regional deal-making. International concern regarding Egypt's investigative and judicial processes heightened. A series of terrorist attacks on government and military targets was followed by the devastating suicide bombing of St Peter's Church on 11 December which killed 28 Coptic worshippers. **Sudan** has continued its repression of dissidents and political separatists, often portraying them as 'agents of the West'.

Peace talks were at a standstill between **Israel** and the **Palestinian Authority**. Isolated terror attacks against Israeli citizens and military personnel continued. There were fears in the West Bank that Islamists were positioning to take over the Palestinian Authority reins when President Abbas departs. Sectarian tensions continued in **Lebanon**, though there was relief when a President was appointed in November after a political impasse of more than two years. The President is always a Maronite Christian, under Lebanon's confessional



Concern about human rights in **Iran** persisted, especially the high execution rate but also the continued arrest and detention of Christians. In **Turkey**, although religious minorities were not initially targeted in purges following the attempted coup, hate speech against minorities then increased. Some churches and Christians were falsely accused of having Gulenist links, and some expatriate Christians were imprisoned or expelled.

Egypt's church leaders broadly welcomed the enactment of long-awaited legislation on the construction of churches, even though areas of ambiguity remain such that decisions about building and repair of churches could still be at the whim of local governors. The ongoing campaign of harassment of Christians in **Sudan** has seen the intimidation or imprisonment of church leaders and confiscation or destruction of property.

Many Christian schools in **Israel** faced severe financial difficulties due to the government's discriminatory funding policy, but improved dialogue with the Ministry of Education raised hopes for a solution. Meanwhile vandalism attacks on churches have been less frequent thanks to more effective policing as demanded by church leaders. In **Palestine** Gaza's Christian communities continue to dwindle – as throughout the region, Christians from Muslim backgrounds feel especially vulnerable. Despite several terrorist attacks in **Lebanon**, including suicide bombings in the predominantly Greek Catholic town of Qaa, a broad commitment to preserving inter-communal co-existence has been maintained. **Jordan's** King Abdullah reaffirmed the importance of the Christian presence in the Middle East and upheld his country as a model of co-existence.

Stringent restrictions on freedom of expression continued in **Algeria**, including high-profile blasphemy cases against two Christians. In **Morocco** there were helpful calls in local media for greater religious freedom and for recognition that Moroccan Christians can still be loyal citizens.

The **UAE's** appointment of a Minister for Tolerance, following the 2015 law prohibiting religious discrimination, was welcomed by church leaders.

power-sharing arrangement. The overwhelming numbers of refugees remains a source of economic strain and social tension. The same applies in **Jordan**, where comparative stability has been tested by rising economic and political tensions, and by terrorist attacks at the end of the year.

Algeria's parliament overwhelmingly approved the adoption of a new constitution which proponents say will consolidate democratic gains, though critics question this optimism. **Tunisia**'s Ennahda party, a member of the governing coalition, announced it would cease pursuing an Islamist agenda.

Morocco remained stable, though the expulsion of peace-keeping staff heightened concern that conflict might erupt once again in Western Sahara. The Ministry of Education ordered the revision of some curriculum content that incited violence against non-Muslims.

Ineffective governance and rule of law continued to affect **Somalia**. Somali communities in neighbouring countries also faced pressures, especially in Kenya where a decision to close refugee camps has led to forcible repatriations.

Gulf Co-operation Council countries faced growing economic challenges and increased political and social tension. **Saudi Arabia** was rocked by suicide bombings, and came under increasing criticism for alleged war crimes in Yemen. Major economic diversification plans were announced and the religious police were further weakened in political jostling between senior royals.

Bahrain's oppression of political opposition (predominantly Shi'a) intensified, **Oman** took action against a critical newspaper, the **UAE**'s tough cybercrime laws drew attention, and **Kuwait** also cracked down on perceived dissent. Kuwait was commended for implementing regulations to enhance the rights of migrant workers, while **Qatar**'s introduction of a new contract system for migrant workers was cautiously welcomed. The UAE appointed Ministers for Happiness and for Tolerance, the latter to promote tolerance as a fundamental value.



ASSISTING INDIVIDUALS

When requested or authorised by Christian leaders, MEC provides support to the church in the Middle East and North Africa region by assisting victims of persecution.

MEC assists victims of persecution by: offering encouragement and informed, trustworthy expertise; mobilising worldwide prayer, in open or confidential networks (in 2016 prayer was requested in 92 cases and 111 prayer requests were issued, 77 to open networks and 34 to confidential networks); initiating political advocacy on behalf of victims of persecution (in 2016 there were 29 cases which involved advocacy); and providing practical and financial support (in 2016 there were: 109 incidents with consultancy provided; 44 cases which involved relocation efforts; and 21 cases where donor support was provided to cover lawyers' fees, assist the families of those detained or killed for their faith, and cover costs associated with relocation - a total of £53,000 / US\$66,000 / €62,000 was dispensed).



ANALYSIS OF CASES & INCIDENTS

Total cases & incidents

Incidents¹⁾ **342**

Ongoing, no change in 2016 **15**

Verified as not persecution **25**

Unverified **17**

Implying cases of persecution addressed **285**

Persecution cases with active MEC involvement **157 / 53%**

Cases addressed by local action **8 / 3%**

Cases in which no active output would be appropriate **40 / 13%**

Cases without authorisation to act **14 / 5%**

New incidents **219 / 4.2 per week²⁾**

New cases of persecution **177 / 3.4 per week³⁾**

Incidents with MEC's watching brief **87 / 25%**

Types of active output

Cases with advocacy **29**

Incidents with consultancy provided **109**

Cases for which prayer was requested **92**

Prayer requests issued⁴⁾ **111**

Press releases issued **3**

Cases where donor support was provided **23**

Cases involving relocation efforts **44**

¹⁾A *case* is a confirmed event of persecution, whilst the term *incident* includes what is not verified or has been shown to be not religiously motivated persecution of Christians

²⁾123 cases continued from earlier years, with developments during 2016 in 108 and none in the other 15 (which were nevertheless monitored)

³⁾This is computed from the line above by subtracting the 'not verified' and 'not persecution' incidents

⁴⁾Several prayer requests included more than one case and several cases were included in more than one prayer request

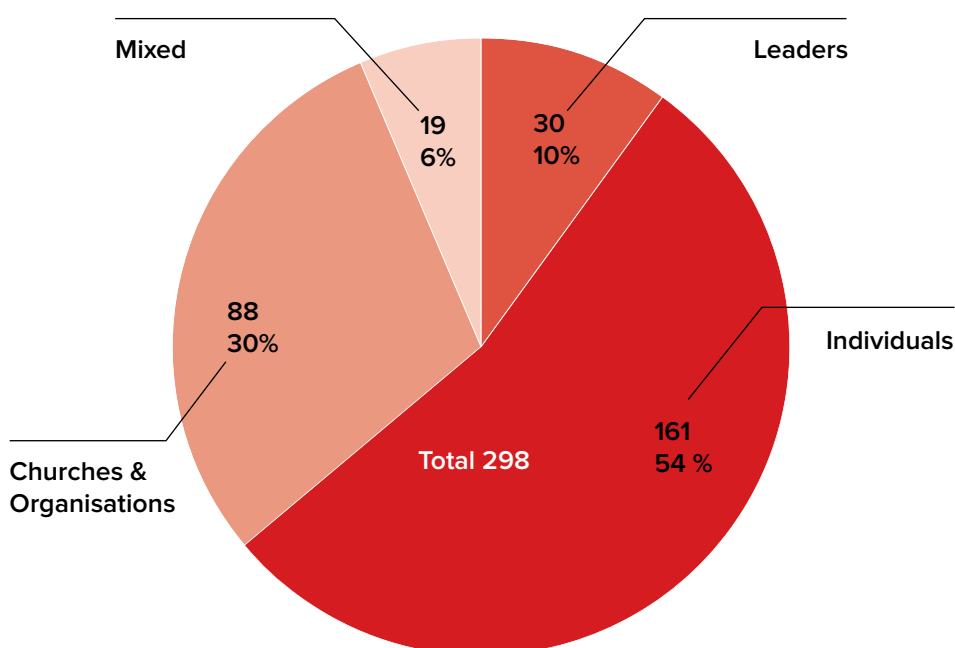


Source of persecution versus type of persecution

Where a case is classified as more than one type of persecution it is included multiple times in the following table, inflating source counts but keeping types accurate. The percentages are of the number of cases, so the percentages in the right-hand column add to more than 100%; effectively they are the percentages of cases that involve each kind of persecution.

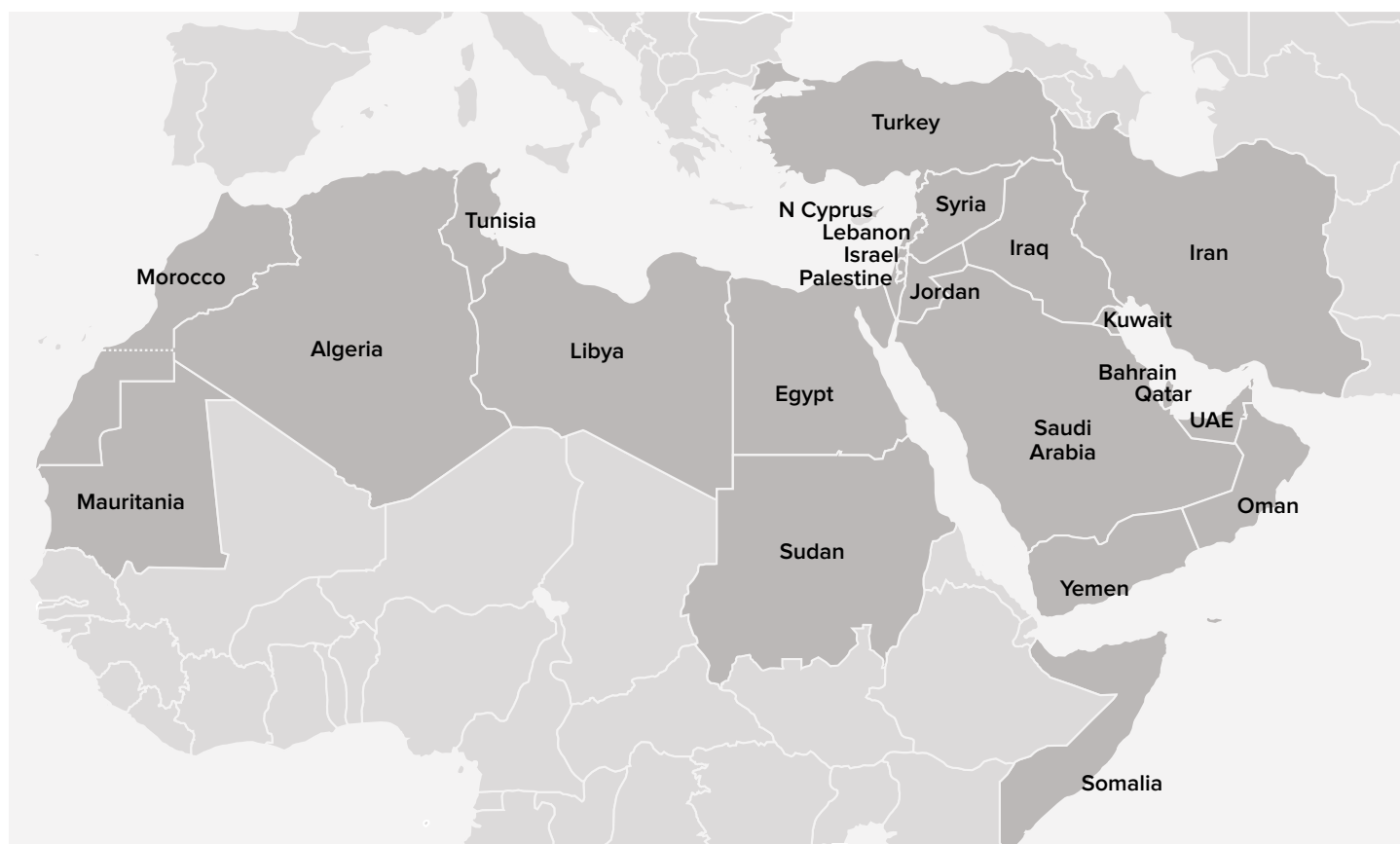
	State	Extremist	Society	Family	Total	%
Death	0	13	0	2	15	5%
Loss of liberty	49	13	0	3	65	22%
Forced to flee	20	6	6	37	69	23%
Deportation / denial of entry	10	0	0	0	10	3%
Forced conversion	1	4	0	1	6	2%
Bodily harm	6	8	5	12	31	10%
Child custody	0	1	1	6	8	3%
Legal	41	3	4	6	54	18%
Documents confiscated	7	0	0	0	7	2%
Damage to property	5	25	8	0	38	13%
Disruption of events	11	4	1	0	16	5%
Education	4	0	0	0	4	1%
Employment	3	0	0	1	4	1%
Harassment	24	18	11	20	73	24%
Total	181	95	36	88	400	
%	45%	24%	9%	22%		

Target of persecution



Countries / territories where incidents occurred

Numbers include all incidents, whether persecution or otherwise. Rank is based on the number of incidents recorded



Rank	Country/Territory	Incidents
1	Iran	56
2	Egypt	41
3=	Jordan	32
	Syria	32
5	Turkey	29
6=	Iraq	19
	Israel	19
8=	Saudi Arabia	15
	Yemen	15
10=	Algeria	12
	Lebanon	12
	Palestine	12
13	Sudan	11
14	Morocco	7
15=	Kuwait	6
	Libya	6
17=	Somalia	4
	Tunisia	4
19=	Mauritania	2
	Northern Cyprus	2
	Oman	2
	UAE	2
23=	Bahrain	1
	Qatar	1

EXAMPLES OF ASSISTANCE

Sudan: In December 2015 the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) arrested Czech Christian Petr Jašek, two men from Darfur (Ali Omer and Abdelmonem Abdumawla Issa Abdumawla) and three church leaders (Telal, Rev. Kuwa Shamal Abazmam Kurri and Rev. Hassan Abduraheem Kodi Taour). Rev. Kuwa was released after three days but told he needed to report to the NISS regularly until 16 January 2016. He was re-arrested on 24 May. Ali Omer and Telal were released on 8 and 10 May respectively. The other four remained in detention. On 4 August the prosecutor sent their case to court and the detainees appeared at Bahri Criminal Court for a pro forma hearing. The four detainees were charged with several offences, including ‘waging war against the state’, espionage, ‘conspiracy to carry out criminal acts’ and ‘undermining the authority of the state through violence’. Some of the charges are punishable with the death penalty. Twenty court hearings were held in 2016. In January 2017 Kuwa was released, and the following month Petr Jašek was released.

MEC assisted by: maintaining close contact with the lawyers and family members of those detained, providing consultancy services; submitting 14 advocacy requests to MEC’s advocacy network; holding advocacy meetings in Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, the US, Canada, the UK and the EU; and issuing five prayer requests.



Rev. Kuwa and Rev. Hassan

Turkey: The trial of the five perpetrators of the murder of three Christians in Malatya on 18 April 2007 continued in 2016. At the 115th hearing on 28 September 2016 the First High Criminal Court in Malatya convicted and sentenced Emre Gunaydin, Cuma Ozdemir, Hamit Ceker, Salih Gurler and Abuzer Yildirim to three aggravated life sentences each for the premeditated murders. Retired Colonel Mehmet Ulger was sentenced to 13 years and 9 months in prison for ‘violation

of confidentiality of communication and forgery of official documents’, while Major Haydar Yesil received 14 years and 10 months. However, 14 other suspects were acquitted of being members of a terrorist organisation. Pending an appeal, it seemed the five perpetrators would walk freely out of the courtroom but the next day they were arrested and imprisoned on the order of a state prosecutor.

MEC consulted on support activities with representatives of Turkey’s Association of Protestant Churches and the lawyer representing the families of the victims, and assisted them by: using publicity to give the trial a higher profile internationally; liaising with German officials (one of the Christians murdered was German) to ensure the German Embassy sent observers to hearings; sending representatives to attend a hearing; submitting an advocacy request to MEC’s advocacy network; holding advocacy meetings in Australia, France and the EU; and issuing six prayer requests.

Malatya perpetrator escorted to the courtroom



CHALLENGING INJUSTICE

When requested or authorised by Christian leaders, MEC provides support to Christians in the Middle East and North Africa region by challenging unjust laws, policies and attitudes.

MEC challenges unjust laws, policies and attitudes by: undertaking research-based advocacy on legal and structural issues that underlie persecution; campaigning for the reinstatement of civil rights to converts from Islam; and addressing unhealthy responses to persecution such as hasty relocation to the West.

MEC's advocacy network includes a wide variety of contacts such as members of parliament and government officials in North America, Europe, Australasia, the Far East, South and Central America and Africa, as well as officials within the different institutions of the UN and EU.

COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES

MEC expends a considerable amount of time working with others in a variety of different ways. Some of these activities take only a little of MEC's time, however some others require quite a significant investment of our resources.

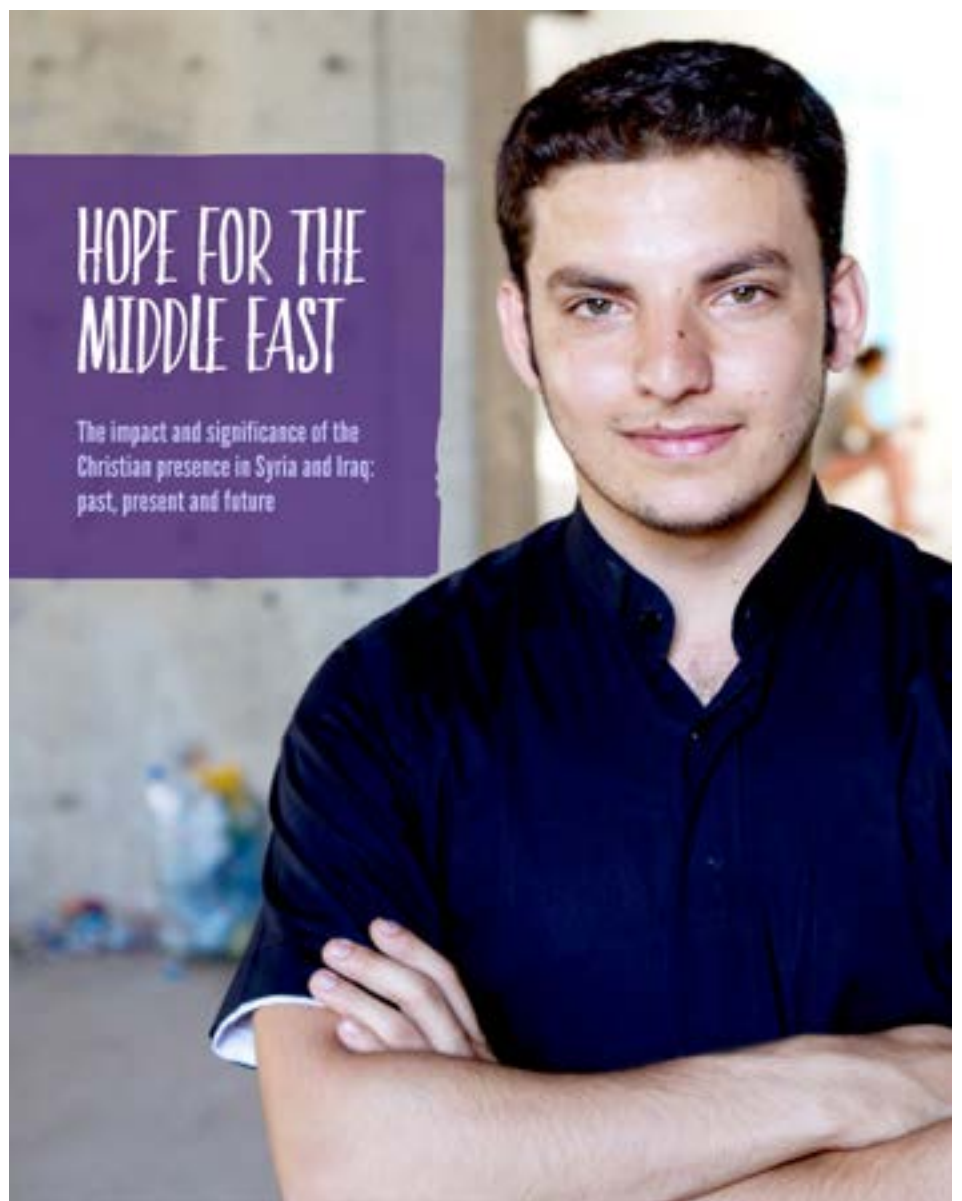
MEC has had involvement with Open Doors in their advocacy project '**Hope for the Middle East**', which is carried out in support of the Christian communities throughout the Middle East and North Africa region. The project was launched in early 2015, is scheduled to continue until 2021, and includes a wide range of activities which are designed to provide support, encouragement and advocacy for the church in the region, with an initial focus on the two countries of Syria and Iraq. The activities in this advocacy project are organised under four main pillars which are entitled 'Listen', 'Educate', 'Mobilise' and 'Influence'. MEC leads the 'Listen' activities of the project, and is also contributing to the 'Influence' activities.

MEC has continued collaboration with a number of different groups who are advocating for **Christians in Iran**, with MEC leading an initiative to co-ordinate and share information with other ministries concerning prisoner details. A collaborative effort with 18 other human rights organisations led to the issue of a joint appeal and press release in

late November, calling on the international community and UN bodies to protect the rights of Christians in Iran.

In addition MEC is a founder member of the Religious Liberty Partnership and has been involved with seven regional and country-specific partnerships, helping to provide crisis response support. These partnerships together cover every country in MEC's region. MEC staff serve on the leadership of three of these networks.

MEC works with Open Doors on their campaign 'Hope for the Middle East'



BUILDING SUPPORT NETWORKS

MEC has multiple contacts in every country in the region, including national church leaders in all countries where there is a legally recognised church, other national believers including those from non-Christian backgrounds (many of whom have leadership responsibilities), expatriate Christians, lawyers, human rights NGOs etc.

At the time of writing (February 2017) the numbers of recipients in MEC's distribution networks are:

Private prayer (codes 1-2)	771
Public prayer (codes 3-4)	2,168
Press releases	934
Advocacy requests	531

Many recipients use prayer requests in their own networks, expanding distribution to many more prayer partners.

MEC includes distribution guidelines at the head of all advocacy and prayer requests. These are referred to as Circulation Codes and are as follows:

CONFIDENTIAL. Limited to internal circulation. Do not circulate this outside your immediate organisation. May not be cited or quoted.

RESTRICTED. For internal circulation within your organisation and with trusted groups or individuals known to you. Please quote "Middle East Concern" as the source of the information. Not for release to the press.

OPEN. May be circulated to general mailing lists, outside organisations, and quoted from freely in reports citing "Middle East Concern" as the source of the information.

PUBLIC. May be circulated to general mailing lists, outside organisations, as well as to the press for publication citing "Middle East Concern" as the source of the information.

ADVOCACY REQUESTS

MEC makes targeted use of advocacy contacts – distributing requests not to all in our network but only selected individuals assessed as having greatest potential for effective engagement and influence for a particular case.

PRESS RELEASES

MEC issued three press releases in 2016. Information from public prayer requests (codes 3 and 4) regularly appeared in Christian media.

PRAYER REQUESTS

A total of 111 prayer requests were issued in 2016: 22 with circulation code 1; 12 with code 2; 77 with code 3; and 0 with code 4.

All requests were sent to the private network and 77 to the more open network (and posted on MEC's web site).

MEC's prayer requests are translated into Korean for all four codes, and Portuguese, Spanish and Mandarin for public requests, i.e. codes 3 and 4. There were 13, 79, 522 and 7 recipients on the respective distribution lists at the beginning of 2017, contrasting with 13, 80, 367 and 6 at the beginning of 2016. Some recipients onward-circulate MEC's prayer requests in wider prayer networks. Consequently, distribution is more extensive than implied by these numbers.

MEC's advocacy requests are translated into Spanish and French, for European and Latin American contacts.

WEB SITE & SOCIAL MEDIA

In order to mark MEC's 25th anniversary in 2016 the web site **meconcern.org** was re-launched on 10 August, unveiling MEC's new visual identity (including a new logo, colours, typefaces and graphics). The site is designed for viewing on phones, tablets and PCs and includes: latest news and prayer requests; information in English, Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin and Korean; an interactive regional map; information about the situation of Christians in all countries of the region; a donation facility; and subscription facility for prayer requests in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin and Korean.

MEC established a Twitter account **@MiddleEConcern** and Facebook page **/middleeastconcern** in 2015. In early 2017 MEC had 2,200 followers on Twitter and 400 on Facebook, compared to 1,100 and 200 in early 2016. Posts include links to prayer requests on the web site, and links to media reports relating to the religious freedom of Christians in the region.

EXAMPLES OF ADVOCACY



Slimane Bouhafs: MEC initiated advocacy on Slimane's behalf

Algeria: On 31 July 2016 Slimane Bouhafs (49), a believer from a Muslim background, was arrested in Sétif for blasphemy against Islam. He had published a message on social media about the 'lie of Islam' and shared articles and cartoons considered insulting to Islam. On 7 August he was given the maximum sentence: five years' imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 Algerian Dinars (US\$900). The court claimed he refused to appoint a lawyer. The Algerian Protestant Church filed an appeal, and the Algerian League for Human Rights (LADDH) appointed lawyers to defend him. In the first appeal court session, contrary to statements made by the court, Slimane protested he had been deprived of his right to a lawyer and had been given insufficient time to prepare his defence. He insisted he did not forego his right to appoint a lawyer. In an Appeals Court verdict on 6 September his sentence was decreased to three years. In October, because of his deteriorating health, his family and LADDH appealed for a presidential pardon, but without success. A support group organised a demonstration on 19 November at the Ministry of Justice. The police asked the demonstrators to return another day, explaining no officials were available to deal with their demands. In November Slimane was moved from Bel Air prison to Constantine prison. He was attacked by fellow inmates when he defended Christianity and freedom of expression following an inflammatory sermon by an imam who incited hatred against Christians. An application by his family to move him to another jail has not been successful.

MEC responded by: submitting two advocacy requests to MEC's advocacy network; holding advocacy meetings in the US, Canada and the UK; and issuing five prayer requests.



Maryam Naghash Zargaran: MEC initiated advocacy on Maryam's behalf

Iran: In July 2013 Maryam Naghash Zargaran was sent to Evin prison. She had been arrested in December 2012 and released on bail. She was found guilty of 'acting against national security' and sentenced to four years. Her arrest was reportedly because of collaboration with Saeed Abedini in establishing an orphanage. She was allowed a four-day furlough in November 2014 but was assaulted on returning to prison. In October 2015 she was allowed to attend hospital but returned to Evin without receiving necessary treatment. In May 2016 she reportedly remained critical but the prosecutor refused to allow medical furlough. She started a hunger strike to get treatment, was taken to hospital but returned unconscious. In June she was granted leave for medical care and went home. A court ordered her to return to prison but her family refused to allow this as she was still ill. Eventually she returned to Evin. In August she reportedly ended a hunger strike begun in July to protest against prison injustices and request 'immediate and unconditional release', in conjunction with an application based on article 58 of the penal code. The court denied her request but she was allowed medical

furlough. In September she had to return to prison after refusing to cooperate with state authorities. She was allowed five days' medical leave in November but on her return in December she was informed she had to serve another 42 days to make up for unauthorised absences. She was allowed five days' furlough.

MEC responded by: submitting three advocacy requests to MEC's advocacy network; holding advocacy meetings in France, the EU, Mexico, Argentina and Uruguay; and issuing eight prayer requests.

In November 2016 MEC and 18 other organisations called on the international community and UN to protect the rights of Christians in Iran



TRAINING & EQUIPPING

When it is requested or authorised to do so by Christian leaders, MEC provides support to Christians in the Middle East and North Africa region by equipping them to face persecution.

MEC equips Christians to face persecution with seminars on: Biblical perspectives on persecution; standing up for rights and religious freedom; crisis management; handling arrest, detention and interrogation; prevention of and preparation for persecution, and assistance to victims; and refugee processes (this topic was introduced in 2016).

Content of the seminars is tailored to the audience on each occasion. Bespoke seminars are provided on request, covering Biblical, legal and practical perspectives on persecution, as well as historical background and current regional trends.

EXAMPLES OF TRAINING

Legal training course: MEC is committed to encouraging and empowering the church in the Middle East and North Africa to become an agent for change in societies and communities, not only for Christians but for all who suffer injustice. MEC provides training aimed at imparting a commitment to human rights and human rights advocacy, and necessary knowledge and skills. As part of this effort, MEC helped to lead a three-day training course for Christian church and community leaders in Egypt in December. The participants came from all over the country. MEC led six sessions. Topics included: legal knowledge (international and regional human rights law); mechanisms at a local, regional and international level that can be used to challenge human rights violations; and the concept of human rights advocacy, and the advocacy process. In addition to imparting knowledge, the seminars also provided training in different skills necessary for human rights work, including: problem analysis; stakeholder analysis and advocacy targets; coalition building; messaging; and advocacy methods and activities. The training included lectures, group discussions, and individual and group exercises.

Seminar on Refugee Status Determination interviews: Suicide rates among Sudanese asylum seekers in Egypt were found to be high and research by the International Catholic Migration Commission determined a contributing factor was stress on refugees undergoing the asylum and resettlement process. A critical point is the Refugee

Status Determination interview, verifying validity of claims for asylum. According to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is someone who ‘owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality’ and cannot return. Many false claims about persecution are made and interviewers may reject valid claims if they detect inconsistencies or false statements. It is preferable to prepare asylum seekers for the interview rather than risk rejection and the difficulties of an appeal. MEC has developed a workshop based on a presentation to help prepare asylum seekers. The workshop lasts 3-4 hours depending on whether translation is required. The presentation informs asylum seekers about the process and aims of the interview from the interviewer’s perspective. It includes advice on preparation and which documents to bring to provide evidence. A key goal is getting asylum seekers to focus on main points the interviewer will seek to determine their status. Another part of the workshop is a role play where asylum seekers play the parts of interviewer and interviewee, asking sample questions supplied by the UN Refugee Agency. After the workshop, asylum seekers with genuine claims as a result of persecution for religious beliefs should have confidence to face the interview knowing what to expect and feeling prepared to answer questions in a way that will help their application.

TEACH-LEARN INITIATIVE

From 2012 to 2014 MEC developed a ten-module course entitled ‘The Christian and Persecution’ as part of the TEACH-LEARN project, an initiative of the Overseas Council, the Middle East Association of Theological Education and the Middle East Christian satellite TV network SAT-7. All of the course materials, including translations of the materials and recommended readings into Arabic, were complete by the end of September 2014 and were then adapted by the TEACH-LEARN project team for an online platform. The courses have been available online since the beginning of 2015. During 2016 MEC undertook preparations to make versions of the courses available on the MEC web site in 2017.



ANALYSIS OF TRENDS

COUNTRIES

Iran was again the country in which MEC had most cases (56). Persecution in Iran is overwhelmingly perpetrated by state authorities, in sharp contrast to many Arab countries where major sources of persecution are family and society, with some impunity granted to perpetrators by the authorities. There has been little change in overall numbers of incidents or ranking in recent years despite improvements in Iran's international relations since July 2015. The majority of cases addressed by MEC in 2016 involved Christian converts imprisoned by state authorities, or awaiting court cases which have been protracted or left pending as a form of intimidation. Nearly half of the cases in Iran were continuing from 2015 or earlier years.



Numbers of incidents in **Egypt** increased somewhat from 2015 levels (41, up from 26) but remain below levels seen in previous years, particularly during the surge of violence following the overthrow of the Islamist government in 2013. A key trend in 2016 was the rise in cases stemming from an overflow of sectarian tensions into violence, either against Christians or against their property. In many cases these tensions centred on claims (often based on rumours) that a Christian was planning to use their property as a house of worship. The right of Christians to build and maintain places of worship was a high-profile issue, with Parliament passing new legislation in August which, while welcomed by some church leaders, was widely considered deficient and ambiguous. The failure of judicial authorities to bring perpetrators of sectarian attacks to justice has persisted.





Numbers of cases in **Iraq** dropped from previous years (19, from 31 in 2015), perhaps reflecting the fact many Christians fled from areas of greatest threat prior to 2016 (and very few have returned, despite some areas being ‘liberated’ from Daesh control by Iraqi and Kurdish forces). In the cases recorded by MEC the perpetrators of persecution were overwhelmingly extremist groups or family members rather than state authorities. The state authorities remained weak amid continuing sectarian tension. Although Christian believers enjoy greater stability in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq, those from Muslim backgrounds faced family pressures.



In **Israel** 2016 saw a reduction in cases involving damage to Christian property, especially in so-called ‘price tag’ vandalism attacks, reflecting more effective policing. There was an increase in recorded cases of general harassment of Christian believers, often at the hands of ultra-Orthodox religious groups. There were several cases involving Ethiopian Jewish followers of Christ.



The number of cases handled in **Jordan** remained high (32). The majority involved pressure against Christian believers from Muslim backgrounds, usually at the hands of family members. In several cases, Christian believers had fled from Jordan to escape family threats, not confident that the authorities would protect them in Jordan. Despite Jordan’s moderate stance within the regional context and its tolerance of indigenous Christian communities, pressures faced by Christian converts are significant.

The low number of cases in **Libya** reflects the very small number of Libyan believers and the fact the majority of expatriate Christians have left the country due to the prevailing instability and violence. Two thirds of these cases involved abduction of non-Libyan Christians by extremist groups.





In **Saudi Arabia** most cases involved national Christian believers rather than expatriates. This reflects a low level of interference with expatriate and migrant worker fellowships, which in turn reflects a further weakening of the religious police. The challenges for national believers, should their faith become known, remain intense.



Though middle-ranking in terms of the numbers of cases handled by MEC (11), **Sudan** remains one of the countries of greatest concern in MEC's region. Almost all cases involved pressure from state authorities, with several inter-related cases involving imprisonment of church leaders, confiscation and destruction of church property, and high levels of other intimidation forcing church leaders to flee. The level of government surveillance means Sudanese Christians have been justifiably cautious about providing information on events in their country.

As with Iraq, many Christians fled from areas of **Syria** under greatest threat (especially from extremist groups such as Daesh) prior to 2016 and so the reported cases may be an under-representation of the scale of pressure which continues against Christian communities. A significant proportion of the incidents recorded by MEC were unverified or deemed not to be religious persecution targeting Christians. This reflects firstly the general challenge of information-gathering as warfare has continued, and secondly the fact many challenges faced by Christians (and reported in some media as religious persecution) are also faced by many other communities. While the majority of incidents occurred in opposition-held areas and were perpetrated by religious extremists, some were perpetrated by criminals taking advantage of the security vacuum.



THEMES

A total of 15 confirmed cases of persecution handled in 2016 involved martyrdom. Of these, five were updates on cases involving murders of Christians in Syria, Libya and Yemen in previous years. The ten cases from 2016 involved a total of 40 deaths. The large majority of these were murders of Christian-background believers rather than converts, killed in extremist attacks against Christian targets. The most notable cases were the suicide bombing of St Peter's Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo on 11 December in which 28 worshippers died, and an attack on a Catholic-run care home near Aden on 4 March in which 16 were killed. Christian converts remain vulnerable to so-called 'honour killings' at the hands of family or community members – though only one such case was recorded by MEC in 2016.

Our analysis of the source of persecution showed state authorities were the perpetrator in 45% of cases, consistent with previous years. Contributing significantly to this in 2016 were the large numbers of cases in Iran and Turkey, the majority of which involved state authorities.

The family or community were responsible in 31% of cases, and extremist groups in 23%. This marks a reversal from recent years. The drop in cases involving extremists may in part reflect the extent to which Christians have left especially vulnerable areas in recent years (especially Syrian and Iraqi Christians from areas controlled by Daesh or other Islamist groups, but also expatriate Christians from Libya and Yemen). At the same time, the rise in family-based pressures correlates well with reports of growing numbers coming to faith in Christ from Muslim backgrounds. Converts routinely face ostracism from family and community, and sometimes greater levels of threat or violence.

There was a slight rise in the proportion of cases in which the target was a church or institution (36%), but the majority of cases continue to involve individual Christian believers. In 10% of cases the target was a church leader, so these cases could perhaps also be considered attacks on the church.

The proportion of cases in 2016 involving Christians fleeing from persecution remains consistent with 2015 (23% of all cases) and at higher levels than in previous years. This in part reflects the ongoing refugee crisis in the region which has seen millions displaced in recent years. Those refugee movements include some cases of Christians (predominantly from Christian backgrounds) fleeing persecution that is specifically motivated by religion. However, more significant in MEC's caseload are cases involving Christian believers from Muslim backgrounds fleeing from family- or community-based threats or violence.

The proportion of cases in which the pressure was recorded by MEC as ‘general harassment’ rose significantly in 2016 (24%, up from 17% in 2015 and 12% in 2014). While this designation indicates less intense forms of pressure (when compared for example to legal measures or violent responses), there is little evidence to suggest this reflects diminishing severity of persecution. Rather it reflects the complex and drawn-out nature of many cases, with general harassment one aspect or stage of a situation which may escalate or otherwise involve a range of other more intense pressures.

The proportion of cases involving damage to or destruction of property dropped in 2016 (13%) from the 2015 level (17%). The higher figure in 2015 reflected increased extremist attacks against churches and other property of Christians, especially in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Yemen and Israel (in Sudan the government was the perpetrator of similar attacks). Some of those pressures (such as vandalism attacks in Israel) lessened during 2016.

A larger proportion of cases seemed to be protracted, with 36% of incidents addressed in 2016 having commenced in 2015 or previous years, and 60% of all incidents recorded as ‘ongoing’ at the end of 2016 (up from 47% in 2015).

One category in which cases are almost always protracted are those involving out-of-country relocation. MEC remains concerned about the tendency among some to rush to out-of-country resettlement options, often through resorting to refugee systems, rather than exploring local temporary relocation options. This remains a key challenge which MEC seeks to address, for example through training initiatives.

NUMBERS

The total number of incidents handled dropped to 342 (compared to 370 in 2015 and 395 in 2014). The number of incidents that were unverified or were confirmed not to have been cases of persecution fell, reflecting a more selective methodology. The total number of confirmed cases of persecution addressed was 298 (compared to 309 in both 2015 and 2014).

It should not be deduced that the persecution of Christians has become less severe in 2016. MEC is aware that these listings of incidents must be regarded as only very partial, due to the secrecy in which many Christians (especially converts) operate, the challenge of obtaining information from many parts of the region, and capacity issues.

The proportion of cases in which MEC has had direct input (i.e. providing consultancy, mobilising prayer, initiating advocacy, or providing financial or other practical support) increased slightly in 2016 to 53% (from 50% in 2015 and 32% in 2014). This in part reflects a more selective methodology, with MEC's capacity being more effectively channelled toward cases in which such input was appropriate and feasible.

The successful resolution rate remained low at 12% (comparable to 11% in 2015 and 14% in 2014). In other words, 12% of cases were closed after the human rights violation was corrected or partly corrected. The low rate of successful resolution reflects the increasing complexity of cases, and also the rising number of cases that take years rather than months to be resolved.

Some types of persecution continue hardly to be reflected in cases, for example job discrimination and education of children, especially for Christian converts. Both are known to be challenges for Christians in the Middle East and North Africa, and such issues are often combined with or reflect ostracism by family. It is common for discrimination to go unchallenged, either because there is no means for redress or because to make an official complaint or initiate legal challenge would be intimidating and costly. MEC is keen to encourage and provide support to those who are prepared to take a stand against injustice and pursue challenges to their conclusion.



ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

What difference to the Christian (and non-Christian) communities of the Middle East and North Africa region does MEC make?

MEC is available for Christian individuals, communities and organisations facing pressure because of their faith. Christians in the region (nationals and expatriates) express gratitude for the reassurance MEC's presence brings. Christians in the region are encouraged to know that informed and trustworthy expertise is available should they (or those they are working amongst) need it.

Consultancy provided by MEC enhances the ability of suffering people to handle their plight wisely, reducing immediate adverse consequences and facilitating constructive local responses. The number and proportion of cases addressed by local action is evidence of this.

MEC's seminar and training programme builds the capability of nationals to react wisely and proactively to denial of their religious freedom. Indigenous Christians tell MEC this is one of the most valuable activities undertaken on their behalf.

Furthermore: MEC discusses with national Christians how to engage with constitutional review processes to call for the rights of all citizens to be affirmed and protected; practical actions taken by MEC lead to improved situations for many individuals; MEC is collaborating with Christians to challenge structural issues in their societies; and experience proves that consistently addressing specific human rights violations in a country contributes over time to effecting change in underlying structural issues.

The preservation of Christian communities is vital not just for the benefit of those communities but also for the benefit of the wider societies of which those communities are a part. Christians are part of the fabric of those societies, and the protection and consolidation of pluralism can be important as a bulwark against increased radicalism.

MEC affirms the power and value of facilitating informed prayer. In secular terms this can be viewed as the suffering community knowing their plight is known to people who will identify with a key aspect of how they understand their identity. Such knowledge increases their ability and resolve to endure their suffering. Testimony to this is provided by cases where prayer is the only action sought by victims when publicity and advocacy are also options, and reports from victims and those supporting them that they attribute changes to their situations to the prayers of others. It is frequently the case that victims, and those supporting them, express appreciation for the prayers of followers of Jesus around the world

Outcome of cases in 2016, differentiating between active & non-active cases

	Violation cannot be reversed	Violation corrected, closed	Violation partly corrected, closed	Violation stands, closed	Violation partly corrected, continuing	Ongoing, unjust delay	Ongoing	Total
Active⁵⁾	4	12	5	15	10	9	103	158
	3%	8%	3%	9%	6%	6%	65%	
Non-active⁶⁾	19	8	8	16	3	5	69	128
	15%	6%	6%	13%	2%	4%	54%	
Total	23	20	13	31	13	14	172	286
	8%	7%	5%	11%	5%	5%	60%	

⁵⁾Active means MEC has issued prayer, press or advocacy requests, provided consultancy or otherwise actively contributed to attempts to change the situation

⁶⁾Non-active means there appears to be no appropriate action, or authorisation for action was not given, or the situation is being monitored

Although it is rarely possible to demonstrate a direct causal link, this analysis suggests cases are more likely to be resolved if MEC is actively involved. Persecution cases without MEC's active input appear more likely to result in the human rights violation standing. This may also reflect the fact MEC is more likely to provide active support in cases where there is a realistic chance of success.

STAFF / TRAVEL

STAFF

At the end of 2016 there were ten people in the MEC staff team, including one who joined during the year.

Another three people were preparing to join the team in 2017.

TRAVEL

In 2016 the members of the MEC staff team met with Christians from (or working in) all 24 of the 24 countries and territories in MEC's region.

During 2016 the members of the MEC staff team:

- visited 12 of the 24 countries and territories in the Middle East and North Africa region
- attended 7 conferences focusing on one or more countries in the Middle East and North Africa region
- visited 11 countries outside the Middle East and North Africa region specifically to develop MEC's support networks
- attended 2 conferences / forums where MEC's attendance was primarily to maintain and develop support networks



FINANCES

NOTES:

Figures are presented in GBP and rounded for ease of reference.

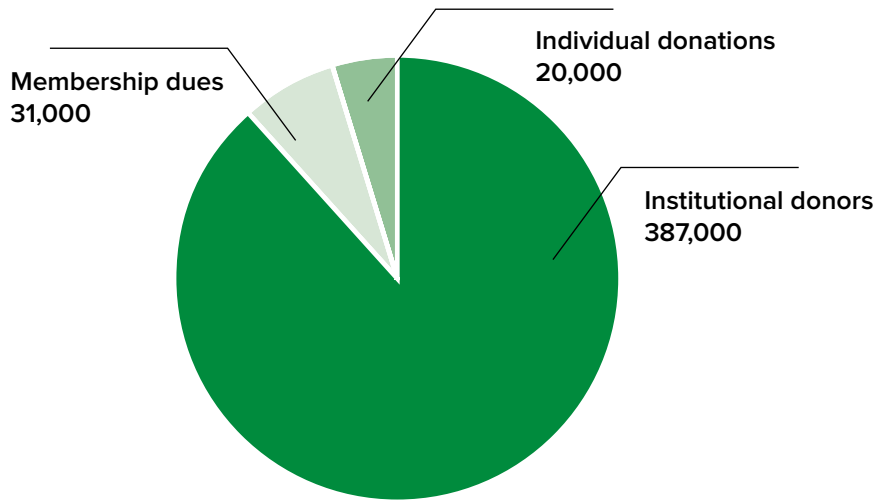
The substantial balance of income over expenditure in 2016 is exceptional. This balance reflects the receipt during the year of significant donations intended to make MEC's financial health more resilient and enable MEC to recruit additional staff in 2016 and 2017.

This generosity has already led to the expansion of MEC's staff team, including the addition of dedicated fundraising capacity so that this expansion will be sustainable. The arrival of two more staff members was delayed until 2017.

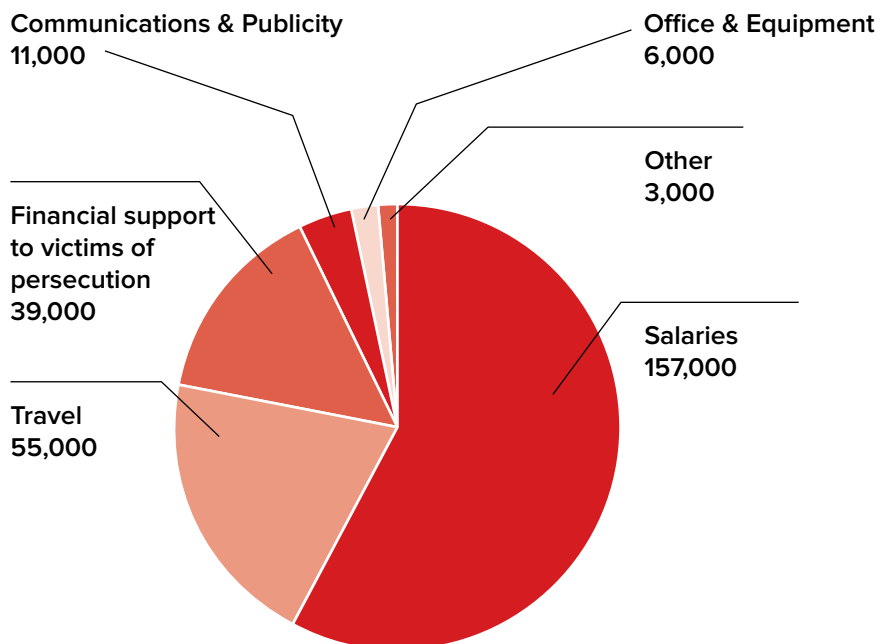
This generosity has also allowed MEC to bring its policies on financial resilience and financial reserves in line with the guidelines of the UK Charity Commission.

MEC is profoundly grateful to its members and other donors and partners who provide so generously, and to those serving on MEC's governance board who help MEC to maintain the high standards of accountability and stewardship to which we are committed.

INCOME GBP 437,000



EXPENDITURE GBP 272,000





defending
the religious
freedom of
Christians



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