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BHUTAN

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The country of Bhutan – famous for its measurement of Gross National Happiness instead of Gross Domestic Product – sits at number 31 on the Open Doors 2015 World Watch List, the top 50 rankings of countries where Christians are persecuted for their faith. With centuries-old traditions of Buddhism, the Bhutan government sees the protection of the faith as a duty – forcing Christians to wait patiently for equal rights.

The Christian minority in the tiny Buddhist nation of Bhutan remained underground until 2008 and while Bhutanese Christian pastors now speak publicly, sharing their love and respect for their country, it is illegal for Christians to introduce their faith to others.

In addition to this, the government restricts the construction of any non-Buddhist worship buildings. The celebration of some non-Buddhist festivals is also banned and there are no Christian burial grounds. Non-Buddhists are not allowed the same benefits as others such as free education and Bhutanese who convert to Christianity can lose their citizenship. However, the church in Bhutan is permitted to meet in private homes – but Christians in remote or rural areas still encounter many difficulties, with meetings in remote villages monitored and disturbed.

It is in this environment that Bhutanese pastors Tandin Wangyal and Mon Thapa (also known as David Lobzang) were arrested in March 2014. The two were in the process of carrying a sick child to a clinic in a village where they had arrived the previous day, in response to an invitation to hold a three-day seminar for 30 Christians who came from neighbouring towns.

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the men were charged with conducting a gathering for religious purpose without prior approval, showing a film without certificate of approval from media authorities and for collecting "illegal funds."

After many prayers, appeals and intense questioning of the 30 seminar attendees, the men continued to profess their innocence and were eventually cleared of the charge of proselytising. But their release still took further negotiating.

After initially facing almost two and a half years in prison, Pastor Mon was released last September after paying a fine of AU\$2,081 in lieu of serving his full sentence. But it would be a further five months before Pastor Tandin (initially sentenced to almost four years) was able to walk free – finally being released after paying a fine of AU\$2,000 in place of jail time a few weeks ago, on 19 January. What a great victory after much hope and prayer!

"Despite this ordeal, God has been very gracious to us in many ways," said Pastor Tandin, just days before he was reunited with his elderly mother, wife and three sons. "We continue to thank Him for Open Doors, who has unceasingly raised intercessors and prayer partners from the worldwide Christian community on our behalf."

Sources: Open Doors, World Watch Monitor, Business Bhutan, BBC

PLEASE PRAY

- Give thanks for the release of Pastor Tandin and Pastor Mon. Please pray for strength for them as they continue leading others in the Christian faith.
- Please pray that Bhutan will evolve into a true democracy where Christians can live, worship and share their faith with others in peace.
- **BREAKING PRAYER:** Please pray for the safe release of Armel Ningatoloum Sayo, the Minister for Youth and Sport in the Central African Republic. The Christian government minister was kidnapped by rebel militia while returning home from church with his wife and brother on 25 January

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