



30 YEARS WORLD WATCH LIST

The publication of the World Watch List has become a trusted tradition in the last thirty years. Originally, the list was intended for internal use only. How did it come to have authority far beyond Open Doors?

From the beginning in the 1990s, Wybo Nicolai, a researcher at Open Doors, was involved in compiling the World Watch List. Surprisingly, there was no idealism in the origin story: with the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the need to smuggle Bibles into Eastern Europe disappeared. “We suddenly had money and staff left over. In 1991, a small research unit within Open Doors International — with just one researcher — was commissioned to find out the countries where we were already active and where we could expand,” Nicolai says.

“I had to come up with advice four times a year on two questions: Which countries is Open Doors already active in and should we expand? And: are there countries missing, that we’ve never been to? CEO Johan Companjen asked me to tackle this in 1991. I was given great freedom to do research, but at the same time it was a great responsibility — suppose I gave wrong country advice...”

“At the beginning of 1992, I wanted to develop a scientific and as objective as possible method to obtain hard data on the number of persecuted Christians and the extent of persecution, and to map this on a global level. This could help us make much better decisions,” explains Nicolai.

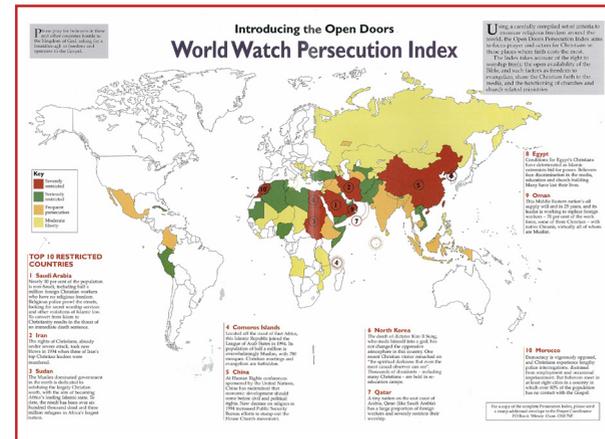
“I had a few challenges: a. What exactly do you understand by persecution? b. What about the rights of individual believers and how can you organize or be active as a church? (How do you balance the score?). And c. When is it legally impossible to live your faith? Asides from just incidents. For instance, we developed a scientific method to objectively map the extent of persecution and the number of persecuted Christians worldwide.”

NO INTERNET, ONLY FAX

The internet did not yet exist, and many messages had to be sent by fax. This was a huge job yet within two years the first World Watch List saw the light. According to Nicolai: “With that list in 1993, the field teams and leadership were able to move forward. This is how Nigeria, Indonesia and India came onto the map. We expanded our work in Iran, Egypt and Pakistan. It wasn’t until later in the nineties that the idea of informing our supporters grew.”

“WE ARE NOW SEEING PERSECUTION IN AREAS THAT USED TO APPEAR STABLE AND CHRISTIAN”

It turned out to be a golden move. “The list turned out to be a fantastic tool for raising awareness and prayer from our supporters. The WWL initiated a change of course, because Open Doors now started working in every country where persecution was present.” The WWL has caused Open Doors to take a structurally different course since



The Open Doors World Watch List was introduced to supporters in the late nineties.

1996, by working in any country, regardless of the source of persecution. Also, in countries where Hinduism and Buddhism are dominant (India, Myanmar, Bhutan). That has remained the case to this day, Nicolai confirms. “From then on, Open Doors offices wanted to give the supporters a complete picture of the persecuted church.”

AUTHORITATIVE

The new claim of being the best-informed organization about Christian persecution put pressure on the research team. By the end of the 1990s, a small team had been created. Sometimes, the media voiced doubts about the methodology and reliability of the annual World Watch List, while governments reacted negatively or in a hostile manner to the publication. In 2012, Open Doors decided to refute the criticism with a much more detailed questionnaire. Partly due to this tightening, the list grew into an authoritative document.

The World Watch List is desperately needed, emphasizes Open Doors researcher Nicolai. “Because it simply shows that Christian persecution is a huge issue: hundreds of millions of Christians are being discriminated against or oppressed.” He recalls the founder of Open Doors, Anne van der Bijl, who passed away in September 2022, seeing

Open Doors as an end-time ministry. “In our time, the gospel has reached almost all countries. Then, according to the Bible, the hatred of all nations will be directed against Christians: persecution is no longer regional or national, but global.”

Looking at the past decade of the World Watch List, Nicolai observes the “phenomenal growth in persecution”, to at least 360 million Christians. “This worrying trend is rapidly exacerbating. We should not think that we can solve persecution with the list. We

can, however, help persecuted Christians to stand strong to proclaim the testimony of Jesus.”

GRIM, YET HOPEFUL

The overall picture is becoming grimmer, says Nicolai. “That can be depressing, because we are now seeing persecution in areas that used to appear stable and Christian, such as in the Sahel, West Africa and Mozambique. You see much more physical violence, also against women and children.”

At the same time, God continues with His work. In the West, Christianity is on the decline, but in Asia and Africa the church is growing enormously. That is tremendously encouraging, hopeful and spiritually enriching. That side of the story makes me very happy.

Nicolai has some wishes for the future of the World Watch List. “Preferably even more data, but regimes make communication increasingly complicated. For the team I hope that there will be more financial resources to continue the work well and to make it stronger. And I hope that we can spread the list even more in churches at home and abroad. I firmly believe in prayer. The WWL is a wonderful incentive for that!”