**Presbyterians urged to pray for Afghanistan**

With the conclusion of the airlifts from Kabul’s airport, which saw the United States and the UK, who were joined by members of the Irish Defence Forces and others, in evacuating nationals, diplomats and ‘vulnerable’ Afghans, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has urged its members across the island to pray for the country and its people, especially its small Christian community there, and consider responding to the emergency relief effort, as the Taliban take control of the country.

Speaking about the situation, the convener of the Council for Global Mission, Rev Dr Liz Hughes said, “As the country’s provincial capitals fell to the Taliban in such quick succession and the ultimate fall of the government, half a million people have now been internally displaced, adding to the three million already displaced due to decades of conflict.

“Aside from the desperate, chaotic and tragic scenes we saw at the airport last week, we understand that hospitals continue to be stretched by the Covid 19 pandemic and the country is experiencing one of its worst droughts in decades with the threat of famine in some regions. Many social, religious and ethnic minorities are now already experiencing violence, oppression and loss of freedom, and are facing a very uncertain future in the re-established Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. It is therefore important that we pray and contribute to the international aid effort where we can,” Dr Hughes said.

Speaking about the situation and the Christian population of Afghanistan, the Moderator, Right Reverend Dr David Bruce, said that at this time, it could be as many as 12,000. “While there are no visible church buildings, believers meet in secret, constantly having to change the venue and time of meetings. Just now, it is too dangerous for Christians to be out of doors.

“We understand that the Taliban are stopping and searching suspected Christians in the street, checking phones to look for evidence of someone’s Christian faith. It has also been reported that one man was shot for having a Bible downloaded on his phone. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are terrified, on their knees, and crying out to God.”

Reminding the Church of Jesus’ promise in Matthew 16:18 “...I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”, the Moderator and Dr Hughes encouraged the church to pray for Afghanistan:

         That the hand of the Taliban would be stayed from killing, violence, and oppression, and that religious tolerance would prevail

         For well-coordinated and effective international emergency relief initiatives that will provide food, water, clothing, shelter and medical supplies for the fleeing and displaced

         For the protection of human rights, of social, religious and ethnic minorities being singled out and targeted, especially for women and children

         For our brothers and sisters in Christ in Afghanistan to be salt and light; for the church to be strengthened in the face of persecution.

They also encouraged church members to consider responding to the emergency relief effort through the work of PCI’s development partners, Christian Aid Ireland [**www.christianaid.ie**](http://www.christianaid.ie/) and Tearfund [**www.tearfund.org**](http://www.tearfund.org/) Opportunities to pray for and advocate on behalf of the Afghan people can also be found on their websites. For more detailed news and prayer updates focusing on the church and other persecuted minorities in Afghanistan, information can be found on the website of SAT 7 who deliver Christian satellite television for the Middle East and North Africa [**www.sat7.org**](http://www.sat7.org/).

In conclusion, Dr Bruce said, “As we search our hearts to know how to respond in the midst of such pain, hopelessness and despair, it is good that we hear the voices of other Christians in the region, those who are all too familiar with persecution. One Iranian pastor reminds us that despite the Islamic revolution some 40 years ago, today, through much suffering and martyrdom, there now stands in Iran the fastest growing church in the world.

“May we be encouraged to ‘see the unseen’, to trust that right now Christ is standing with his followers in Afghanistan, and we should pray that they be salt and light, strengthened in faith, and experience the abiding presence of Christ with them in the furnace, in the unifying and purifying fire of persecution. At this time we remember God’s Word, ‘…Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze’ (Isaiah 43:1-2),” Dr Bruce said.