



A world in movement

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That phrase – “A world in movement” – captures my imagination in several ways. It is a reflection of my own life – I spend much of my time travelling to different parts of the world. It is a reflection of the lives of many of the people for whom and with whom I work, who have become my friends – refugees, people on the run, escaping persecution, war and oppression. And it is a reflection of my vocation, and my desire – to see people join with me and others in a worldwide movement for freedom, justice, peace, human rights and human dignity.

For that very reason, I think these questions posed in Bob Dylan’s song *Blowing in the Wind* are questions for us all to keep in mind:

How many years can some people exist before they’re allowed to be free?

How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn’t see?

How many ears must one man have before he can hear people cry?

How many deaths will it take ‘till he knows that too many people have died?

As well as the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” Our focus should not be limited simply to trying to get people out of prison or stop people being killed or raped or help people escape, vital though that work is. Our focus should be on how to change systems and promote and protect human dignity, including religious freedom.

In my work for human rights, I have been deported from Burma twice, chased by the police in China once, missed a bomb in Pakistan by five minutes, slept on the Great Wall of China, a bamboo hut in the jungle in Burma and on a beach in East Timor under the stars, visited prisoners, orphans and refugees, travelled to North Korea to meet the world’s most brutal regime, stood outside churches in Indonesia which have been forced to close, surrounded by an angry mob of extremists, visited villages where the homes of Ahmadiyya Muslims have been burned down, sat with Ahmadiyya children living in camps for displaced peoples because it is unsafe for them to return home. I have witnessed the birth of a new nation in East Timor, visited the war-torn Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh, and visited the leader of the democracy movement in the Maldives under house arrest, prior to a transition to democracy which resulted in his election as his country’s first democratic President – though tragically four years later he was overthrown in a coup. In the past year, I have become involved with a campaign to urge China to stop the barbaric practice of killing prisoners of conscience for their organs – a practice known as forced organ harvesting. In the course of that I have worked closely with Miss World Canada, actress Anastasia Lin – whose most recent film *The Bleeding Edge* depicts this gruesome crime. Four people whom I have known or known people close to have been assassinated: two of whom were close personal friends of mine, the other two were people I had not met previously but knew their friends and relatives well. Amidst all of this, four years ago I became a Catholic in Burma, inspired and received into the Church by Burma’s first-ever Cardinal, with whom I work closely – Cardinal Bo. So, my world is a world in movement.

I work for an international human rights organization, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which promotes and advocates for one of the most basic human rights around the world: freedom of religion or belief. Our work is focused on Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” While much of our work is for Christians around the world persecuted for their faith, we believe that freedom of religion or belief is indivisible – it is for everyone, everywhere – and therefore we work to defend that right for everyone, of all faiths or none. So, as well as speaking out for persecuted Christians, we also work, for example, for Muslims in Burma and China who are facing severe persecution, for Baha’is in Iran, for Ahmadiyya Muslims persecuted by other Muslims in Pakistan and Indonesia. And we believe this is a basic right for all people, not simply for those who have a religious belief. So, a few years ago, I visited a young man in prison in Indonesia who was jailed not because of his religious belief but because he does not have a religious belief. Alexander Aan posted on Facebook that he does not believe in God, that he is an atheist – and simply for that reason, he

was imprisoned for two years. I went to visit him in a remote prison twice, and campaigned for his release.

I specialize in Asia – particularly Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, China and North Korea – and I have previously worked in Pakistan, East Timor, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

As you listen to this, you may be asking yourselves three questions: how did I get involved in this, who are the people I meet in the course of my work, and what difference can it make? In the remainder of my time, I intend to try to address these questions.

When I was 18 years old, after graduating from high school and before going to university, I took a year off and spent six months teaching English in China. Those six months opened my eyes to the wider world and its needs, and were without doubt the time when the seeds of my love of Asia, my passion for international issues and my concern for human rights and justice were sown. I lived in a city on the east coast of China, Qingdao – famous for the best beer in China. I spoke no Chinese when I went out there – I tried to learn from a phrase book but as you may know, Chinese is a tonal language and if you get the tone wrong you change the whole meaning of what you are saying. I found when I went into shops and said what I thought was “excuse me”, young female shop assistants either blushed and giggled and turned away, or ignored me. After a few weeks of this I asked a Chinese friend why I kept receiving this response. It turned out I was not saying “excuse me” but “Please kiss me”! And they never did! My other big error was instead of saying I am an English teacher, I told them: “I am an old English snake”!

For about a decade I travelled in and out of China regularly – as a university student I went back to China to teach in my summer holidays, and after graduating I moved to Hong Kong to work as a journalist. But at university, two other encounters changed my life. The first was my encounter with God; the second was my encounter with the work of Christian Solidarity Worldwide. And the two have been intertwined ever since – my human rights work is an integral part of my faith journey. I am not a human rights activist who happens to be a Christian, or a Christian who happens to work in human rights. I am a human rights activist because I am a Christian. One of my heroes is William Wilberforce, the 18th century British politician who led the campaign to end the slave trade. He once said of the injustice of slavery: “We can no longer plead ignorance, we cannot turn aside.” Proverbs 31 says: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves” – and that, I knew from very early on in my Christian faith, was my vocation.

In Hong Kong, however, I began to discover other parts of Asia – and that led me to East Timor, to Burma, and then beyond.

And so now I want to tell you about some of the people I have had the privilege of meeting in the course of my work: people who have suffered horrific injustices, but also people who have stood up to injustice with a faith and courage that is incredibly inspiring.

Let me start with East Timor. For 24 years, East Timor suffered a brutal and repressive occupation by the Indonesian military after their invasion in 1975 in which thousands were slaughtered, raped and tortured. The bodies of many victims were dumped into the sea. Tens

of thousands were displaced, and faced starvation. In total, at least a quarter of the population died as a result of the Indonesian occupation. 'We are dying as a people and as a nation,' wrote the Catholic Bishop of Dili, Carlos Belo, in a letter to the UN Secretary-General in 1989.¹ He never received a reply.

In 1999, however, the situation dramatically changed. Indonesia's President Habibie surprised the world by deciding to hold a referendum. But the Indonesian military unleashed a new campaign of violence and intimidation months before the referendum and throughout the campaign, in the hope of frightening the people into voting to remain part of Indonesia. In just one of many incidents, on 6 April, 1999 – four months before the referendum – Indonesian military and their militia surrounded the Catholic church in Liquiça, where hundreds of people from neighboring villages had taken refuge, having previously been driven out of their homes. They had thought that the church would be the one place of sanctuary.

I visited Liquiça nine months after the massacre. I met the priest, Father Rafael. He described how a soldier had tried to shoot at him, though mercifully the gun had jammed and failed to fire. He also told me how soldiers had thrown tear-gas into the church. As the people came running out, they opened fire, killing indiscriminately. People hiding in the roof of Father Rafael's house were also shot dead. The soldiers, knowing people were in the roof, simply fired round after round into the ceiling, until the blood dripped through and the screaming stopped. Those who survived were forced to settle in the fields, under the menacing watchful eyes of the military and militia. It was wet season, and the people had no shelter, no food and no medicine.

Such violence continued right up until the referendum. Despite this, 98 per cent of those eligible to vote turned out to do so. When the result was announced, an overwhelming 78.5 per cent chose independence from Indonesia, as opposed to the other option, special autonomy within Indonesia. For a few brief hours, there was celebration – but that soon turned into a time of deep tragedy, terror and grief. Within hours of the announcement of the results, the Indonesian military and the militia responded with an orgy of violence even more ferocious than the pre-referendum campaign of terror. An Indonesian soldier scrawled graffiti on a wall with this message: 'You can have your independence, but you will eat stones.'

I watched these events through the media with increasing horror. I organized a demonstration in Hong Kong. We delivered a letter to the Indonesian consulate protesting at the violence. We held a press conference and prayer vigils. But the crisis seemed unstoppable. The international community was not willing to intervene unless Indonesia would accept an international peace-keeping force – something that, given Indonesia's track record up to this point, seemed impossible.

Finally, after eight days of killing, rape and destruction, President Habibie agreed to allow an international peacekeeping force into East Timor. Although so much had been destroyed, the peacekeepers were able to prevent further carnage and the United Nations guided the country through a transition to independence three years later.

Three months after the peacekeepers arrived, I visited East Timor for the first time. Within half an hour of my arrival in Dili, I heard first-hand the horrors of what had gone before. The very first person I met was a 15-year-old street boy called Amil.

‘My mother – dead,’ said Amil. He drew his index finger down his stomach and demonstrated the action of pulling out his intestines. ‘My mother with baby – both dead,’ he said in broken English, as his eyes filled with tears. ‘My father dead too,’ he continued, indicating a thrusting movement of a spear going through his stomach. ‘And my big brother too,’ he explained. His brother’s attackers had burned both sides of his face with cigarette butts and hacked off his arms and legs with machetes. Amil had witnessed these atrocities with his own eyes. And he was not unusual.

Yet in the midst of such suffering, we find people of faith, courage and hope. One of them was an amazing woman, Sister Lourdes. Her story is told in more depth in my book, ‘From Burma to Rome’, but for now let me simply say that she is the founder of an incredible movement in East Timor – the Secular Institute of Brothers and Sisters in Christ, and their mission is to serve the poor. The impact they have had on East Timor has been extraordinary. During the Indonesian occupation and the violence in 1999, they played a crucial role. Sister Lourdes put her life on the line every day to try to help people displaced by the violence. According to Dr Daniel Murphy, an American doctor who works closely with her, her ability to soften the hearts of the militia was extraordinary. At militia roadblocks, she would get out of her car to speak to the armed men, who would often be pointing their weapons directly at her. ‘Within minutes, she would have them laughing with her, then crying with her, and then on their knees praying with her,’ he recalls.

When the violence escalated after the referendum result was announced, and Dili was on fire, an estimated 15,000 people fled the capital into the hills and forests around Sister Lourdes’s Institute near Dare. When I first met Sister Lourdes just over three months later, she told me that she and the members of the Institute fed and cared for them. ‘All 15,000?’ I asked incredulously. She nodded. ‘How did you feed them?’ I asked naively. Sister Lourdes laughed and looked as if I had asked a silly question. ‘God worked a miracle,’ she explained. ‘Of course, we did not have enough food for 15,000, but each morning I woke up very early, I prayed, and I started cooking rice. The barrel of rice was not enough to feed many, but as I cooked and prayed, the rice just kept coming out of the barrel. The rice never ran out. The day the rice ran out was the day international peacekeepers came.’

I had the great privilege of living in East Timor for three months during the transition to independence, and attending the birth of the new nation. On 20 May 2002, I joined the independence ceremony, and found myself standing next to Father Francisco Fernandes, a friend of mine who had been the first East Timorese I had ever met, living in exile in Macau, and the first person to be exiled from his country in 1975. It was a few minutes before midnight, the hour that the country would be declared independent, and I asked him whether he ever believed he would live to see this day. He smiled and nodded. “Throughout our struggle people

all over the world said to me ‘You are fighting a losing battle. The world will never help you. Indonesia will never let you go. Why don’t you just give up?’ But we had one thing those people did not know about. We trusted God. This is a victory of faith.” And as he said those last words, the national anthem was played, fireworks lit up the night sky and the new, free nation was born.

For five years, I worked on Pakistan, and had the great privilege of working very closely with Shahbaz Bhatti. I spoke to him every week by phone. I travelled with him. On one occasion, we missed a bomb in Islamabad by five minutes.

In 2007, a Christian community in Charsadda, in the North-West Frontier Province, received an ultimatum from extremists: convert to Islam or face the consequences. The night the deadline expired, I phoned Shahbaz to ask for an update. To my surprise, he told me he was in Charsadda. The community were terrified, he said, and they expected an attack at any moment, so he had gone to be with them. That was typical of Shahbaz. But he also told me that the community had been praying. They felt alone, they felt that the rest of the world didn’t know, or didn’t care. “The fact that you have telephoned means I can tell them that someone does know, does care, is praying for them and is speaking for them.”

In October 2009, Shahbaz came to London to address the annual conference of Christian Solidarity Worldwide. As usual, his first request was for prayer. He summed up his life’s vocation in these words: “I live for religious freedom, and I am ready to die for this cause. We have a commitment to bring a change in the lives of people. We will bring a change in the life of those who are living in darkness, we will bring a change in the lives of those who don’t have a hope, and we will bring a smile on the faces of those living under severe harassment and victimization ... This is the key objective of my life – to live for those who are voiceless, who are suffering. We need to change the plight of those who are living in the darkness of persecution, victimization, and that is the commitment we made, to bring justice for those who are denied justice.”

Shahbaz challenged head-on the “forces of intolerance”, and called on his audience to join with him in this struggle: “Let’s pledge that we will work together to promote harmony and tolerance. We will bridge the gaps among different faiths. We will strengthen this world with the message of peace and tolerance.”

At the heart of Shahbaz’s work, particularly as minister, was an effort to reform, or repeal, Pakistan’s notorious blasphemy laws which have been so widely misused with such disastrous consequences for many.

But it was this campaign that in the end cost Shahbaz his own life. On 2 March 2011, he was assassinated – gunned down in broad daylight, on his way to work. Four months before his murder, he recorded an interview with the BBC, for broadcast in the event of his death. He said: “These Taliban threaten me. But I want to share that I believe in Jesus Christ, who has given his own life for us. I know what is the meaning of the Cross and I am following the Cross.

I am ready to die for a cause. I am living for my community and suffering people, and I will die to defend their rights.”

There are calls for the beatification of Shahbaz, and I would encourage you to add your voices to those calls – this man of great virtue, faith and courage would be a symbol of hope for all those persecuted for their faith. His personal bible is on display in a memorial to martyrs in the church of St Bartolomeo – if you have time this week, please do go and see it.

Burma is the country I have worked on for the longest number of years, and it’s fair to say it’s the place closest to my heart. For many years, my work was focused on Burma’s borders with the ethnic groups living as refugees and displaced people, fleeing conflict. For many years, I spent my time crossing those borders illegally, because that was the only way to get into the conflict zones to see the situation first-hand. But in more recent years, I have travelled more regularly into the country on a visa – even though I was deported twice. If you want to hear the stories of my deportations you can ask me afterwards, or read my book, *Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads*. But I want now briefly to tell you just about one person in Burma with whom I am privileged to work closely: one person who has made a significant impact on my life, and who is one of the most courageously outspoken voices for human rights and religious freedom for all the peoples of Burma. Burma’s first-ever Cardinal, Cardinal Charles Bo.

The story of my entry into the Church, and the conversations with Cardinal Bo which led me to become a Catholic in Burma, is told in various articles which you can google, or in my book, *From Burma to Rome*. And I can tell you more afterwards if you are interested. But for now, let me let Cardinal Bo’s words speak for themselves.

In almost every homily, Cardinal Bo finds a way to engage with the social and political challenges the country faces. In his Easter homily in 2014, he said: ‘The task of Christians is to move fences, to tear down walls. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation We went through our way of the cross for the last five decades. A nation was crucified and left to hang on the cross of inhumanity. We were a Good Friday people; Easter was a distant dream. But there are streaks of hope today ... We are an Easter people. And when are we most like Christ? We are most like Christ when we are doing what he did in his extravagant gift of love on Calvary – forgiving. Hatred has no place in this nation.’

In a Christmas homily, his message was equally clear. ‘Do not be afraid,’ he said. ‘Do not be afraid to seek your rights to dignity. Do not be afraid of resisting injustice. Do not be afraid to dream, to imagine a new Burma where justice and righteousness flow like a river The Christian community is at the service of the nation and its people. Empowering the vulnerable will be a major task for the Church in a new Burma.’

In his homily celebrating 500 years of the Church’s presence in Burma, he gave another cry for justice. ‘Our clarion call is to total freedom as St Paul tells the Galatians – “For you were all called to freedom – love one another”. A freedom from hatred, a freedom from want, a

freedom from all kinds of oppression,’ he declared. The Church in Burma is, according to Cardinal Bo, ‘a church of initiative’, ‘a crucified church’, ‘a church of exodus’ with hundreds of thousands having fled war, oppression and poverty in Burma over the past six decades, and ‘a wounded healer’. He challenged the church to ‘reach out’ to others and to work for justice and peace. ‘The Church has never flinched from her social mission, even when it had no support,’ he noted.

In June 2014, Cardinal Bo wrote a powerful article in *The Washington Post*, in which he said that ‘Burma stands on a knife-edge of hope and fear ... Burma’s future hangs in the balance.’

Let me end, very briefly, with the world’s most closed, most repressive nation – North Korea. The only country in the world ruled by a dictatorship that is a dynasty which requires the people to worship it as a deity.

In 2010 I travelled to North Korea with two members of the British House of Lords, two of the greatest human rights champions in our Parliament, Lord Alton and Baroness Cox. We went to try to look the regime in the eye and challenge them on their appalling human rights abuses; we went because our objective with a country as isolated and closed as North Korea is not to isolate it further, but to find ways to open it up. There is no magic wand for North Korea, and certainly I advocate every possible means of pressure, sanctions, and accountability – I helped lead the campaign to get the UN to establish a Commission of Inquiry, something many people said could not be done, and formed the International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea. I have campaigned for the BBC to start radio broadcasts in Korean to the Korean peninsula, and for other means of breaking the regime’s information blockade. But we also felt that it was important to try engagement – with one important caveat: it must be critical engagement, putting human rights concerns at the very center. We took in suitcases of books to give our interlocutors in the regime – because information can change ways of thinking. One of the books we brought and gave to several key people was Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies*! One night in one of our rooms Lord Alton, Baroness Cox and I watched the documentary ‘Nine Days that Changed the World’, about Pope St John Paul II’s first visit to Poland after becoming Pope – a documentary that describes his role in sparking the Solidarity movement and ultimately bringing down the Soviet Union. We hoped whoever was listening to our room was receiving an interesting message.

I will never forget one conversation with a ‘lawyer’ giving us a tour of the ‘Supreme Court’ in Pyongyang. Baroness Cox made an observation on the noticeably uncomfortable seating arrangement for the defendant in court, and asked what does this say about the principle we have in our country of “innocent until proven guilty”? To which the law officer replied with honesty: “In our country, when a person comes to court we don’t believe they are innocent.” That then opened up a wider conversation where Lord Alton raised the question of the political prison camps – with at least 100,000 political prisoners enduring the most extreme forms of torture, execution, slave labour and other crimes against humanity. At first, he denied their existence. When we named the most notorious – Yodok – he claimed he had been to Yodok and it was just a village. Then he got irritated and said: “Who told you about these prison

camps? Was it the South Koreans? Was it the Americans?” When we said no, we knew about the camps because we have met dozens of survivors, he said: “Well, these people are liars and criminals who have escaped from the camps” – which he had just said didn’t exist. The conversation reached a crescendo when Lord Alton said: “What about the case of Shin Dong-hyuk, a young man who was born in a prison camp? How can someone be born a criminal?” The lawyer froze, we froze, and for a few moments none of us were sure what would happen next. But I believe having those sorts of conversations that challenge the regime’s propaganda is valuable. Maybe, just maybe, it may have sown some questions in his mind.

I have shared with you stories of tragedies but also people of faith and courage. I haven’t had time to share all the issues I work on in depth – I haven’t talked much about human rights in China, or the struggle for democracy in Hong Kong, with which I am also now involved. Perhaps we can explore these in discussion. But I want to conclude with this thought: When we hear of the world’s suffering – a world in movement – we face a choice. We can either shut our ears and eyes and try to ignore it, and continue with our own lives uninterrupted. Or we can feel despair, depression. Or we can choose to hold on to hope, to join in a movement to change the world, to light a candle in the darkness. At times, it might feel like we are banging our heads against a brick wall. But I take the view that if enough of us bang our heads against the brick walls of oppression, injustice, war, inhumanity, for long enough, then we might just dislodge some bricks. I leave you with some words of hope, from the former Chief Rabbi in the UK, Lord Sacks, who wrote in his book *To Heal A Fractured World*: “Against the fundamentalisms of hate, we must create a counter-fundamentalism of love ... ‘A little light’, said the Jewish mystics, ‘drives away much darkness’. And when light is joined to light, mine to yours and yours to others, the dance of flames, each so small, yet together so intricately beautiful, begins to show that hope is not an illusion. Evil, injustice, oppression, cruelty do not have the final word.” Let our world in movement mean a movement to help change the world.
