

The Religious Liberty Partnership

Statement on Christians Killed For their Faith

Meeting in Washington D.C. in April 2018, the RLP members assented to the following statement:

The Religious Liberty Partnership strives to demonstrate integrity in all its communications. This is to include integrity in promotions; integrity in information gathering; integrity in dissemination; and integrity in use of statistics and facts.

As members of the RLP, we therefore appeal for a cautious and wise use of figures, with understanding and insight into the underlying methodologies and their limitations.

We reject any exaggerations, oversimplifications or misrepresentations of figures about Christians killed for their faith, and warn that such abuse would jeopardize our credibility in all respects.

We warn the Christian community against any sensationalism that easily can become associated with “martyr” figures. We have better motives for walking alongside the persecuted, and consider sensationalism counterproductive.

We therefore seek the promotion of truth and transparency about the painful and deplorable reality that too many people around the world are being killed for religious motives, or on account of their faith or none, including a large number of Christians.

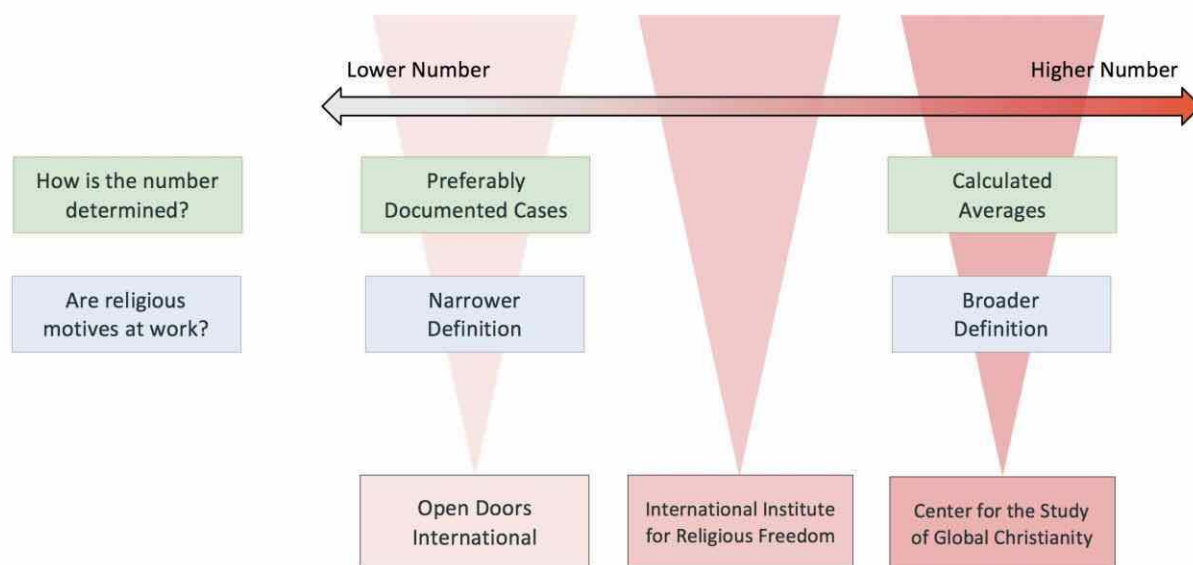
The following is provided as background and context for the above statement. For more information contact us: Info@RLPartnership.org

How many Christians are killed for their faith? Reflection within the Religious Liberty Partnership, By Christof Sauer

The simple answer is: It depends. It depends on how you define a Christian. It depends on how you categorize the circumstances of their death. And it depends on how you count them.

The members of the Religious Liberty Partnership have pledged to use the most reliable statistics to describe the number of Christians persecuted or killed for religious motives. We strictly use the best available statistics calculated in a solid and scholarly approach. Arriving at reliable figures is laborious, but the Partnership agrees that, to be a credible voice, the work is necessary.

Estimates of the number of Christians killed for their faith depend on the definitions and assumptions used:¹



At the low end of the scale, RLP member Open Doors preferably counts documented cases, based on direct evidence wherever this is available. Where this is not possible it makes a conservative estimate based on indirect evidence. For the 12-months period ending October 2017, it found 3,066 cases. In the two previous 12 months periods, Open Doors documented or estimated 1,207 and 7,106 cases respectively.

Open Doors also counts only those cases where specifically anti-Christian motives can be determined. This, too, keeps the number down. Proponents of a broader definition maintain that this narrower approach would miss out on some individuals who are popularly considered martyrs nowadays. Critics also maintain the such an approach does not sufficiently honor the seriousness and the magnitude of the problem.

Is 3,066 the *true* number of Christians killed for religious reasons in 2017? Certainly not, as it is a declared undercount. Obtaining reliable documentation in hostile, contested places such as northeast Nigeria is difficult and often not even possible. The actual number definitely is higher, but this number is a reliable absolute minimum for 2017.

Toward the middle of the scale, another RLP member, the International Institute for Religious Freedom, estimates between 4,000 and 6,000 Christians were killed for their faith in 2017. In 2016, its estimate was 2,000 to 3,000. An estimate of a general average given in 2015 was 7,000 to 8,000. The institute argues that it often is difficult to determine with certainty whether a victim was a Christian, or if the killing was related to faith. As the aim is to estimate probable minimum and maximum numbers the numbers are somewhat larger than the bare minimum numbers of Open Doors.

¹ The nature of this document only allows for a partly simplified presentation of the various positions which each are based on a carefully considered and complex methodology. For a more detailed discussion, including definitions, references to sources and critical review, we refer to a scholarly essay by Christof Sauer, currently only available in German: Kann man Märtyrer zählen und wenn ja, wie? – Gegensätzliche Ansätze, in: Spohn, Elmar (ed.): Gottes Handeln in der Geschichte. Nürnberg: VTR 2017, 78-106.

At the high end of the scale, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity has estimated that 90,000 Christians were killed from mid-2016 to mid-2017 for religious motives. It is a dramatic number, and thus is widely quoted. But there are several things to keep in mind about this figure:

- It is not based on an actual count but is declared “a calculated annual average over a 10-year period”. The number has its origins in an estimate for a ten-year period in the past that is averaged. The center’s 2018 figure is a projection of that estimate into the present. The previous annual average over a 10-year period before 2010 was 100,000.
- In reality, the number of Christians killed varies widely from year to year. For example, the actual documentable number dropped dramatically from 2015 to 2016 and rose again for 2017. Dramatic annual swings in the number make projections uncertain and averages rather meaningless for advocacy purposes.
- The center’s definition of Christian fatalities as “martyrs” is extremely broad and designed for demographic purposes. It cannot be equated with theological definitions of martyrs which make a *clear* connection of the murders to the Christian faith indispensable. The center’s definition rather includes victims of mass murders and civil wars, as well as victims of Christian-on-Christian ethnic violence. These make up the overwhelming bulk of the figures.
- The estimates attempt to screen out killings where the motive is unrelated to religion. However, critics maintain that the method to determine the cross section between Christian martyrs and victims of genocides/mass murders is not sufficiently transparent and the results not substantiated. Plausibility tests on various years make the estimates appear implausible according to critics.