

# Persecuted Christian in Mali tells of conversion

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BAMAKO, Mali (BP)—“Since you are a Christian,” the plumber told Charles Yabaga Diarra, “I can’t give you the same price to fix your stuff that I would do for a Muslim. There is a price for Muslims, and there is a price for Christians.”

Such open disdain is as good as it gets for Christians in Mali, at least in the south. Since a 2012 military coup removed the country’s democratically elected leader, conditions are much more severe in northern Mali, where abductions, murder and sexual enslavement are common.

Diarra is internally displaced in the war-torn country where several al-Qaeda factions have united to control the entire Sahel region. Open Doors, an international religious freedom advocacy and humanitarian aid group helping Christians in 70 countries, ranks Mali as the 17th most difficult country for Christians.

“I think it’s important that Christians (in other parts of the world) know that being a Christian in Mali is not easy. There is very insidious persecution from your family, your friends, even the government,” said Diarra, a husband, father, educational administrator and preacher, in an interview.

“But I think they need to know there’s also hope. That churches are growing despite the persecution coming from every side. ... They need to continue to pray for Mali, for the Sahel.”

# Hearing the gospel in his uncle's home

Diarra grew up in a Muslim family where Christians were disparaged. Christians didn't pray, he believed. Christians drink alcohol, he was told. They eat pork.

His father was a school headmaster, government employee and politician whose leadership Diarra considered too strict and regimented. Diarra ran away from his home in Léré, seeking refuge about 150 miles away at his uncle's home.

There, he first heard the gospel.

Diarra's uncle was already a Christian pastor, having accepted Jesus through the ministry of evangelical missionaries.

"And he said something very strange: 'Because we are Christians, we pray before meals.' And my uncle prayed," Diarra said. "I was shocked. Because this man prayed, he prayed in my mother tongue. I understood everything he said.

"I was so impressed, at the same time I was shocked, because I was told Christians don't pray. And here this man prayed over food. I was very, very impressed by what I heard."

Diarra embarked on a journey that has led to perhaps 100 conversions to Christianity in his extended family.

His uncle took him to Vacation Bible School for a week before advising him to return home. Still not a Christian, he shared the New Testament with his Muslim teenage friends, telling them he had met several praying Christians.

His father overheard. He forced Diarra to return to Quranic

school—commonly attended by 5-year-olds to 7-year-olds—to be proselytized in Islam before enrolling him in high school.

Again in his uncle's home, Diarra tried to convert the uncle to Islam. Diarra asked one of his schoolteachers what he could do to convert his Christian uncle to Islam.

"This is what he said to me. He said: 'Listen young boy, you are not supposed to discuss with Christians. You are not supposed to eat their food, drink their water, otherwise you will get converted.'

"I was staying with my uncle, eating his food and drinking his water," Diarra said with amusement. "Maybe that's why I got converted."

Diarra recalls his conversion in November 1981.

"I said: 'Lord, I'm really tired of seeking the truth. If it's Islam, Christianity or maybe another religion, just show me the way,'" Diarra said. "I was just lost really.

"I'd hardly finished my prayer when a Bible verse I'd learned during Vacation Bible School came to my mind. So [God] saved me, not because of my works of righteousness, but because of his mercy."

## **Family transformed by Christ**

The most difficult days of his teen years followed. His father learned of his conversion, summoned him home and scheduled a "family talk." He urged Diarra to recant.

An aunt, one of 30 or 40 relatives present, urged the family to give Diarra time. Diarra was only a child, she said, and would soon forget about Christianity.

Shouting ensued. The family was divided. Diarra doesn't remember the exact sequence of events, but his father arranged for him to live elsewhere.

Diarra was the lone Christian among as many as 400 classmates when he returned to high school. There, he studied the Bible and religious books to defend his faith in a sea of Islam, and he grew in knowledge and faith.

Upon marriage, Diarra asked his father to allow him to raise one of his siblings.

"My father said, 'no.' He said: 'You are a Christian. I am a Muslim. If I give you one of my children, it means I gave you permission to make him a Christian.'"

But when Diarra's father died within two years, Diarra, as the oldest son, had the privilege of raising his siblings, all 14 of them.

"This is how God works. I asked for one, he said no, but God gave me the 14," Diarra proclaimed. "And today, most of my brothers and sisters are Christians."

He and his wife, also a Christian, now have children of their own. At a recent family gathering, Diarra said, an onlooker remarked that perhaps 100 Christians were in attendance.

## **Enduring the reality of daily persecution**

Diarra's family endures daily persecution as a way of life. His children are called children of infidels, chided and insulted daily at school. Government and businesses work against them. His uncle who took him to VBS is also now internally displaced by the coup.

“Community members don’t want to come to your house,” he said. “They don’t want to greet you. They are doing everything they can to just make your life miserable. It’s very difficult.”

It’s vital that the international community continue to advocate on behalf of persecuted Christians in the Sahel and elsewhere, where violent conflicts increasingly disrupt daily life.

Diarra finds freedom in Christianity.

“Salvation by grace—it’s so wonderful to get that. We are free to come” to Christ, Diarra said. “He gave us freedom to believe.

“Freedom is very, very important to me.”